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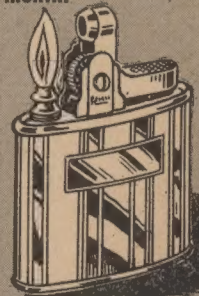
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NOVEMBER, 1948

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A queen of the devil's tables, a king of the roaring range, and a showdown where death held the high cards!
2. **HELL RIMS THIS RANGE!**.....*Tom W. Blackburn* 76  
"The time to kill a snake is when it crawls—an', mister, I aim to make you crawl—to your grave!"

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## ON THE • TRAIL •

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Trouble with the Indians had been confined to brief wagon-train conflicts, isolated stage station attacks and running fights with marauding parties. On the whole, fear of conflict with the redmen was only a remote possibility in the minds of the thousands who clambered over the Sierra summits that spring to seek their fortunes in Washoe.

But the Piutes sensed calamity in this sudden usurpation of their domain.

Through means of communication known only to those native sons of the plains, all the tribes in Utah and Nevada were called together for a council on the shore of Pyramid Lake in Nevada.

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## ON THE TRAIL

Bannocks, the Shoshones—all the tribes which roamed the land from Honey Lake to Mason, and from the Humboldt flatlands to the swift flowing Truckee.

Teepees were pitched on Pyramid's shores and the chiefs talked among themselves, repeated tales of how the white men were driving them from their hunting lands, felling the pinon trees which provided their winter store of food, and of how they were laughed at when they objected to such practices. With each new arrival these tales of white men's injustices increased until the camp seethed.

Only one chief among those assembled held a different view. He was Numaga, a young man who had always been friendly with the whites. He attempted to persuade the others that a war could only mean the eventual destruction of the Indian tribes. But his words fell upon deaf ears. So he adopted a different means. Lying upon the ground in mourner's style, he fasted for three days, hoping that his sacrifice and sorrow would sway the other chieftains.

On the third night, when all the chiefs were called into final council, Numaga appeared before the dimly burning fire to make his last plea for peace. In a stirring talk he warned how war must end, how the whites would keep coming and coming, how their rifles would drive the Piutes and their kinsmen into the rocky reaches of the desert to be stalked by starvation. It would be a grave injustice to their women and children, he said.

The older chiefs listened intently, realizing that Numaga spoke with wisdom. But his words had come too late. Just as he finished talking a weary Indian rider drew up before the council fire, to announce that one of the Piute chiefs who had failed to attend the council, had attacked William's Stage Station with his warriors and killed five white men.

(Continued on page 127)

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By  
**T. C. McCLARY**

# A BULLET FOR THE GUN-LOST KID

He strode towards the gimlet-eyed group already at gun clearance from the bar. . . .

## CHAPTER ONE

### Cold-Decked

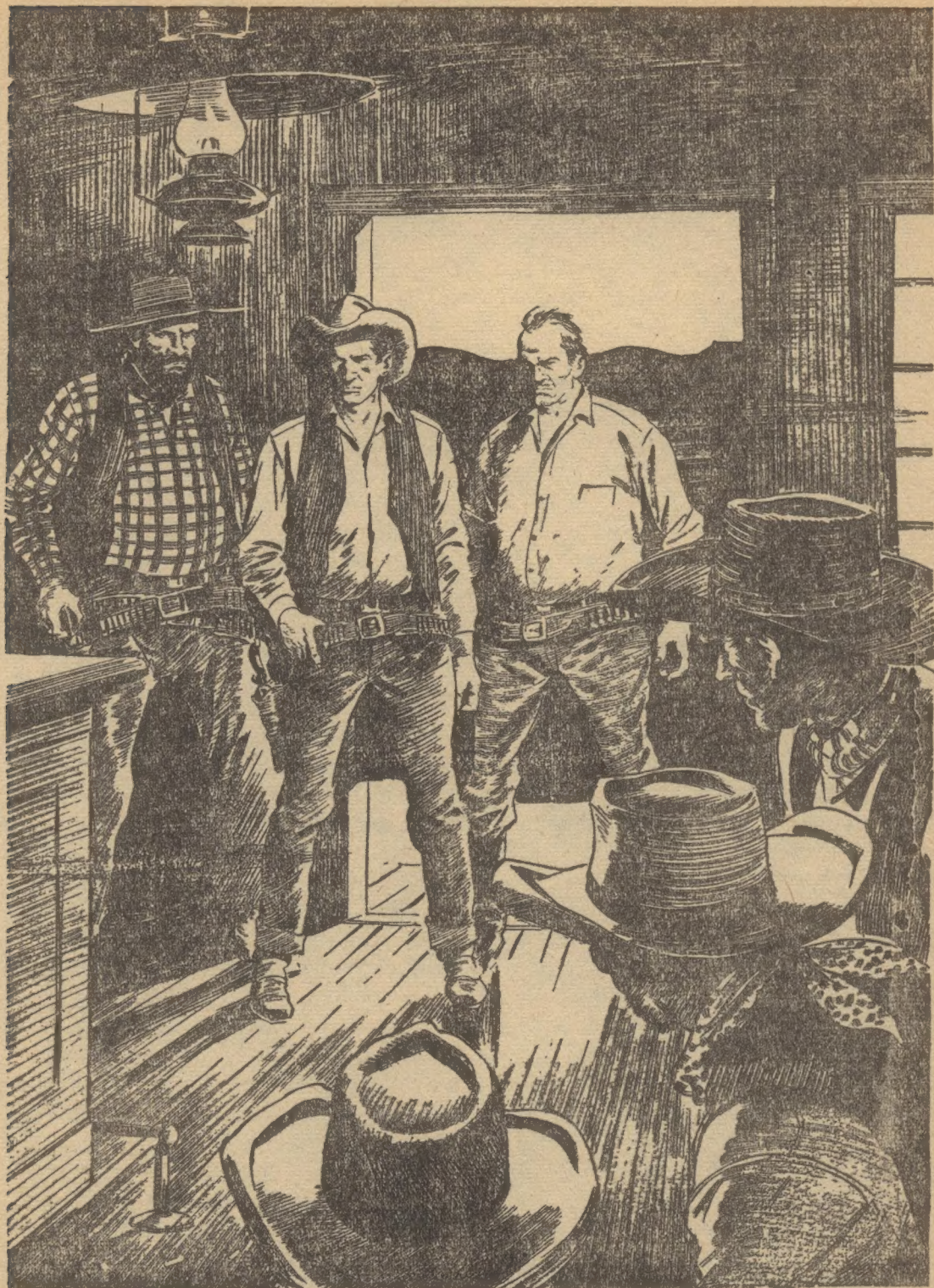
**E**ARLY on this gold and warmth-filled morning, Drifting Jim Steele put his long legged buckskin through the gap of the Humpbacked Hills and dropped down upon Waldoon, already lively under a dustsmoke of early trade. It was a cowtown, pure and simple, sprawling, drab and utilitarian, with no relieving feature of beauty or of color except the washline behind Ma Kefley's.

He saw and identified Denver Flossie's new ribbed green petticoat, and for an instant, a man's rousing smile started to touch his wide slat lips. Before it quite got there it had faded, his slate blue eyes going hard upon the Spanish Spur outfit





*A queen of the devil's green tables . . . a king of the  
hell-roaring range . . . a showdown where death held  
the high cards, and a man's hand was as good as his  
draw!*





sashaying into the town's main drag.

Jim Steele was a man who sat loose and tall in the saddle; deft of movement, quiet of manner, long and lined of leathered face. The ghosts of crows-feet clung to the corners of his eyes, as if once he had laughed a lot—equally at humor and at danger—but that it had been a long time ago, and now even the memory of ready humor was gradually fading away.

He had never meant to settle down; he had never felt the gains and security of property worth the hamstringing of a man's freedom to roam and light where he was minded. He had come to Waldoon on an urgent call from his pa's old partner, Zachary Yates of the Coffeepot, to side him in some unexplained trouble; and before getting the ropes of a range-crowding untangled, Zach Yates got up and died of natural causes, taking even excitement and vengeance out of the game. Steele had been given the authority of foreman and was stuck with the obligation to stay on until Yates heir came to claim the estate—a cross-eyed, bucktoothed, freckle-faced, gangling niece from Boston-way that the country could still recollect with alarm and horror from fifteen years earlier. She had put itching powder in all the undies of Ma Kelley's spring laundry, and the spring laundry in Waldoon belonged to most of the county.

She would be, now, about twenty-five years old, and as she was still addressed by maiden name, must have lived up to all of her earlier looks and ideas of humor. However, he had said he would stay until her arrival, thinking that would be two, at most, four months. But it had been a year and four months already, and he was fraying at an owner's responsibilities and troubles, without an owner's authority to back him. He was beginning to feel like an Apache captive, and now he couldn't even get an answer to his last letter that three big ranches were crowding their lines, and both the hill and desert nesters

were raiding, and that a drought would put hackles up to the point where either Coffeepot had to relinquish its ancient lord's authority, or lead had to fly.

He thought of that now, watching Spanish Spur's dust mushing up in thick yellow smoke, and thinking that a shot in time would save one hell of a lot more than nine, but he was stuck. He could not act as a private individual, and he had no authority to do more than stand by waiting for Coffeepot's owner.

He put his horse into the main drag's fine powdered dust and racked at Piute O'Donavan's Gambling Parlor & Liquorium, a saloon of high popularity due to Piute's occasional lapses from sobriety, as which times he would give away anything but his collection of thirty-odd fancy vests.

Bellowing Romanoff blasted a greeting through the heating airs and stomped in, a big-voiced, big-chested, big-hearted and big-tempered giant with the face of an irritated Brahma charging through a beard that looked like a tangle of prickly brush. There was an eruption of sound from inside as Steele followed up the shallow steps. He moved into the stale whiskey-and tobacco-sodden dimness of the saloon to find Romanoff and Piute nose to nose and roaring at each other across the bar.

"That's what I said!" Piute growled in a mixture of guttural low Ute and shrill Dublin accent. "There'll be no more drunkenness and carousing at my bar! I'm running a dacent saloon here, I'll have yez savvy, and from now on, there'll be no liquor sold here until sun downs, not even a beer!"

"Ya'll sell to me or I'll rip out this damned bar and stuff ya on it and tote you like a torch through town!" Romanoff bellowed.

PIUTE looked downbar for vindication. "Why is it they never learn the dirty stuff is pizen and would even kill a rattlesnake?" he opined. "It



is of shutting down altogether and opening a Temperance House, I'm thinking!"

He dragged out an enormous red bandanna and honked into it like a half-drowned trumpeter swan. Steele grinned, recognizing the well-known remorse that followed one of Piute's more unreconstructed and generous drunks. Piute cleared his bulbous nose and dabbed at his eyes, and began polishing a glass with the bandanna.

"It was a decent, well-ordered, resort for quiet, well-mannered gentlemen, I set up," he complained bitterly to Jim. He waved his glass and the red flag of his bandanna at Romanoff. "And look what I get—ill-mannered, dirty, stinking, ignorant, bellowing wild beasts like him befouling my quiet and peaceable little oasis!"

Bellowing Romanoff's beard was split by the cavern of his mouth, but anger so throttled him that nothing but a mirror-shaking roar broke forth. His enormous arms began quivering with rage, setting the thick mahogany to groaning.

"Stoput, ye damned bleeting blather-skite!" Piute quavered. "Ye'll not even get a beer!"

"By gawdamighty, I am coming straight through this bar and bust a keg open on yore iron conk!" Romanoff managed to gasp, and meant it.

"Oh, it is tough yer getting this early of a beautiful morning?" Piute demanded, and both hands dropped behind the bar. There was the double *pinggggg* of heavy wagon springs; the giant was lifted from his lean upon the bar and catapulted smashing back against the other wall where he subsided like an avalanche coming to rest.

"Making me behave like a renegade hoodlum!" Piute nearly wept. But he looked down at his privately conceived battery with maternal pride. That battery ran the full length of the bar, just above a tall man's belt line—a row of sawed-off

billiard cues fitted into holes on the front side of the bar, made fast to giant springs on the hind side, and carrying the power of a Missouri mule kick when snapped.

Steele regarded the giant's sprawled figure, making a silent bet with himself that Romanoff would be out for half an hour, and not able to bellow again for a week. He looked at Piute who was now standing in a martyr's pose with a look of unhappy piety upon his flushed face.

"Don't be asking it of me, Jim!" Piute pleaded. "It is a man of slow but unswearing conviction I am, and I would not like to be saying no to you! Nivver agin will a drink cross my bar before sundown to any man that lives."

He jutted a lower lip and nodded adamantly, and then with great generosity suggested, "Sody pop?"

"Later. I have business now and would not like to tote a sweet smell on my breath," Steele answered gravely.

He swung out and down to Cono's where the boys had already gathered to guffaw, at safe distance, at Piute's latest attack of conscience. He had, it seemed, outdone himself last night—he had parted with his most vivid green silk vest to Gabby Stacy, the town's garrulous barfly.

Cono's round, conscienceless face glowed cheerfully at each repetition of that information. Just an ordinary drunk left Piute sober and righteous for a week. Giving his green vest away would have him turning away business for a month.

Spanish Spur's outfit were bellied tight against the bar already, and now their boss smacked through the batwings, stopping on short, bowed legs to stare truculently at Steele. He was a squat man, solid and muscular, with the look of beef, short of limb, and surprisingly quick of movement when need be. He had a moon face with moon paleness under his dark burn, and round agate eyes without any other quality to relieve their self-important arrogance.



"You, Steele," he grunted grittily. "I heard you crossed my grass last week at Broken Buttes. The next time you trespass will be yore last drift."

Steele stiffened at the insolent play on his handle, but let the personal angle pass. "Broken Buttes," he stated, "was Coffeepot graze when I came here, and it will still be Coffeepot even when I leave, Tyler!"

The little owner's body tautened clean from his boots. Affront sparked in his eyes and glowed there balefully. "Use mister when you speak to me, Steele!" he snapped. "You may play at being foreman of Coffeepot while you bulldoze that female heir of Yates's, but you have not yet managed to play owner, and you'll recollect yore place!"

The room had gone dead silent and it was a tough spot for Jim Steele. The country was still half-wild of nature, and feudal of caste and authority. A foreman who put himself upon an owner's level not only would bring every other owner and foreman on the range down on him, but would destroy his own always precariously-held authority with his own half-wild outfit. There was the additional fact that he held no authority to build trouble in the name of Coffeepot. To take up the insult, he would have to quit, but if he quit, the range would move in like wolves on the domain it had taken Zach Yates a lifetime to build up and cement together.

A tough spot, and the crowd was waiting to see if he had either the guts or wits to get out of it without crawling. He sucked a long, hissing breath through his teeth, and gave Tyler a bleak, flat stare before dropping his head in a half nod. "Very well, Mister Tyler," he rasped. "If you want me to use the handle we give saddlebums and itchy pilgrims, that is yore business! The first time I feel the fan of a bullet or find one of yore cows by Broken Buttes will be the last time I

ride by there—as Coffeepot's foreman. That is the day I will quit and come pay you my very personal respects as man to man, Mister Tyler."

It was an unexpected twist and the rancher's teeth snapped and ground like too files. The vein along his neck bulged and pounded and turned black. Steele had turned the tables on him, and Tyler could not, now, call on his own outfit to handle the man. His arrogance had made things personal enough to give Steele this opening and chance at equality.

Tyler ripped out a snort and his eyes blazed. "You'll learn respect that day!" he ripped out. "By gawdamighty, I'll teach it to you with a bullwhip!"

He gave an arrogant toss of his head, and moved with his short, abrupt movements down the bar to stand with another owner. His foreman's lips were pulled hard against his teeth, and he stood staring at the bar rail, angered at Steele, but angered at his boss likewise for building something and leaving it unfinished, and in the doing, taking the matter of Steele out of his hands.

THE crowd expelled its breath on a long wave, and spoke its varying opinion silently, and with guarded glances. It was a stalemate between the two, and that was never good when there was trouble breeding under the surface of a range. There would be a shift of alliances and loyalties and opinions out of this—old memories would be stirred, old sores opened, and vengeful men were already figuring ways to make this useful in evening up old feuds.

Somebody stuck his head in the door and sang out, "Stage's coming down grade with Whipper's extra special shakedown! That means a load of strangers for sure!"

There was an instant's silence, then a rousing laugh and somebody chortled, "Piute's, boys!"

Piute, by custom and arrangement with



the stage drivers, was invariably the first stop for anybody aboard to slake the dust out of their throat. And one Whipper's extra special shakedown would not even leave a meek man in a mood to be kidded about getting a drink at sundown. There was a scrape of boots and a sudden clatter of high heels and spurs, and the crowd spilled out and jostled up and into Piute's on the run.

All the boys wanted to mount guard at the door to give some advance sign on what to expect, so to avoid a riot, the job was awarded Gabby Stacy, proudly displaying his new green vest. The mere sight of it turned Piute to looking like a sick gilamonster.

The pound of hoofs and grunt of the sweated horses reached in above the clatter and grind of brakes. Whipper tooled his team in a precarious circle and brought the stage up shaking, smoking and raising a dust moil smack in front of Piute's Liquorium. The laughter and joking died inside and men watched Gabby in dead silence for information as to who was aboard.

His whole wizened frame suddenly froze taut with disbelief, then went up in the air like a loosed clock spring. He came down strutting with chest arched and let out a suppressed, "Boys!" as he preened himself and adjusted his battered hat.

They could see his mouth slit with a cocky, excited grin against a break of hot outer light, then something queer happened to his face. He muttered hollowly, almost with panic, "No, not here! You've got the wrong place!"

He fell back in broken, rigid movements as if falling back before a ghost. The next instant, one side of the batwings opened gently but assuredly. The thing that had excited and then terrified Gabby froze the whole room, the men gaping stupidly.

The handsomest young woman Waldoon had ever seen stood there twirling a silly little parasol and smiling quizzically

as she caught her vision from outside glare. But the thing that shocked and numbed the boys was that she was a respectable young woman. A lady, and nothing else, and not the dumbest and wildest waddy in there needed more than one look to know her caste and quality.

She had a very slim, upright figure, was in a modest, high-collared dress of gray, with a small cameo at the base of her full, round throat, and all of those qualities that come of blood and breeding beat out of her like chimes.

She caught her vision and gave them all a bright impersonal smile and fastening dove gray eyes on Piute, asked with self-assured curiosity, "What's wrong with these men?"

"M'am!" Piute sputtered wildly. "You don't belong—you can't—I mean, you mustn't come in here!"

Her eyebrows made arches against the whiteness of her face. "Why not? It looks quite respectable with everybody drinking soda pop!"

Piute gave a wild look and blurted laconically, "But m'am, I ain't got on my vest and coat!"

"Why," she shrugged amiably, "I will turn aside long enough for that, Piute."

She swung from her hips, looking at the boys with a forthright interest that melted their hearts. Hats came off their heads as gravely as at a funeral. She had a very low, musical voice with a lot of clean, honest amusement in it, but holding no slightest tinge of coquetry nor boldness. Standing there, where she shouldn't be, and where no respectable woman had ever stood before, she had the power to make the crowd feel embarrassment. Men begin to eye each other truculently for the first indication of anyone with anything but a decent thought.

Piute's hard breathing and the clump of his boots as he raced for coat and vest were the only sounds that broke the silence. Whipper sidled through the doors



behind her, rolling sleeves down over his flannels and looking meek and fearful as if this were his personal fault. Even his fierce shoulder wild mustaches had wilted to a complete droop.

"I done told her this is the wrong place," he muttered apologetically. Nobody even moved out of his frozen stare.

"Why, Whipper," she murmured chidingly. "Isn't this the famous Piute O'Donovan's Gambling Parlor and Emporium that you were describing to me?"

"Yes m'am!" the driver swallowed wheezily. "That's jist why you didn't set foot in here!"

"Now see here!" Piute growled, pride arousing him out of his daze. "What did he tell you about my little establishment, m'am?"

"Why," she murmured, and waited a moment, smiling mischievously at the big drops of sweat that broke out on the driver's brow. "Why, he said it was the most strictly operated, honest gambling establishment in the whole southwest, Piute."

Whipper let out a long wheeze, recollecting what he had really said, including the story of a funeral to open the bar every morning. Piute's chest swelled and he moved importantly down bar.

"A REASONABLE description from a man with no vocabulary except for hosses!" he conceded. "But m'am, that is exactly why—well, that is, to be blunt, and meaning no rudeness, respectable young ladies would not care to linger even in a bar of this one's high character."

Again her jet eyebrows made ovals against her smooth brow. "But where else would I set up my game then?" she asked dulcetly.

Piute choked and looked like a man in death struggles. The crowd had livened, but now the wind dumped out of it on a single barked explosion.

"That is," she added, "if I can find some gentleman to stake me. You see, I have to stop here—this is as far as my money lasted."

There was a thunderstruck silence, and then her questing smile roused a small hesitant offer, and another, and then a wild chorus of eager backers. She stood with her pert head tilted a little to one side, musing, and suddenly pointed at Bellowing Romanoff, who had struggled up from one form of daze to be struck with this other.

"I think," she announced, "I will take the offer of that handsome, gentlemanly-looking man with the distinguished whiskers."

Romanoff blinked and felt at his matted beard and pinched his face, and broke out with a bewildered, stupid grin that built up into his usual lusty swaggering assertiveness. Piute just stood there batting his eyes slowly, like a toad, and struggling for breath that wouldn't come to him.

The girl walked over with dainty, well-bred rhythm and put one small foot on the rail. She said quite casually, as if asking for a yard of gingham, "And now that's settled, Piute, I think I need a drink."

Bellowing Romanoff let out a blast of breath like a snorting bull and his eyes blazed dangerously at Piute to refuse this. But Piute wasn't even seeing Romanoff. This last incident was like a hot poker stuck into a balloon; the flesh was suddenly hanging from his jowls in wrinkles.

"You need a drink, m'am?" he whispered hoarsely. "M'am, it is me that needs a bottle! Boys, this is on the house!"

Jim Steele watched all this as startled as any, but with curious speculation threading through his amazement. He watched her take a whiskey; take it neat, without a chaser and without a quiver. He shook his head; he still couldn't believe it. This girl had never been in a saloon in her life, she had been raised to regard the mere knowledge of a saloon's existence as almost unmentionable even in



the lowest whispers. She claimed her handle was Pokerbelle Stone, but she gave it with the prim clarity and coolness of a school teacher.

The boys had come out of their shock with a whoop that set the roof to clattering, and moved into the bar like a rushing stampede. They didn't understand this lady, but they didn't misunderstand her either, and the first fool to bowl out a bold remark was dropped by three iron fists before she could see who had made it.

She had her drink, and thanked Piute and Bellowing Romanoff with all of a woman's forthright and honest appreciation in her smile, and then asked where she might find suitable quarters. Piute glanced toward the balcony and started to open his mouth and clamped it hurriedly. Romanoff's cockiness suddenly stripped from him and he glowered at everybody in general and shifted awkwardly.

Jim Steele moved over with hat in hand. "There is Ma Kelley's," he suggested. "A hard-working house, but clean, and Ma has shot Apache dead without missing a beat on her washboard."

The whole crowd looked relieved at this suggestion. Romanoff allowed, "Why, that is it, sure enough, m'am'" and looked as if the idea were exclusively his. He swaggered and imperiously commanded the town's most respectable element as escort of honor.

At the door, she paused to smile back at Piute. "I usually begin to play at sundown."

"Sundown!" Piute could only gurgled for reply. He stood transfixed where he was until her heel taps died, and grabbed wildly for a full bottle. "Make me a sign," he breathed heavily at Scholar Skeeter, who could spell properly, "No guns, no cussing, no shirt sleeves after sundown!"

Steele stood with a puzzled smile touching the corners of his lips, pressed by the hilarious crowd, but alone in it. Some-

thing was wrong and if that girl could shoot poker, or had ever played anything but euchre, he would choke on it. But in any case, it was certain that her arrival was sure going to change things around that rough town!

He drifted outside and took position upon the precise edge of the stoop and stood there watching and hearing and feeling the impact of the girl upon the town. He watched the dogfight spill out of the town's only bath as to the order of use, and Angelo, the barber, hang up a new sign raising the bath price from ten cents to a quarter, soap extra. There were three separate fights of early rioting drunks defending the girl's honor against some real or imagined slur, and Denver Flossie went flouncing up-street shopping with a sharpness in her bootaps and her pug nose in the air. Nobody stopped to speak, and the men who looked after her today had grins instead of hungry looks. There were only five respectable women in town—Ma Kelley holding a place that was individual, separate and apart—and these women hung like waiting vultures along the street hoping to get a look at the new arrival. A few ranch women rode or drove in and showed the forthright curiosity and humor of their kind when they heard, and the marshal was suddenly sporting his best sombrero, although excitement like this was sure to mean rough going later.

THAT thought ran on the stream of Steele's speculations, and passed, and was brought back for fresh consideration. A cattle range without a lord was like a prairie of buffalo grass at the end of a dry summer—rub any old stones or sticks hard enough and it could spurt into one solid blaze. A smart operator who didn't want to risk starting things off but wanted trouble might bring in somebody like this, a darned clever actress, say, to drop like a spark in prairie grass. It was far-fetched, mostly because he didn't think



anyone on the range was that subtle. But it was something to consider. He discounted the possibility, mostly, not because of its fantasy but because the girl had worn absolutely no makeup, not even powder.

Day's high heat built up into a solid dead-white glare, and out of it, Bellowing Romanoff appeared, scrubbed and trimmed and hair filled with stinkum, and, by thunder, in a broadcloth tailcoat and pegtopped trousers. He had a ready glint in his eye for trouble, and Steele restrained his grin, but could not take his attention off Romanoff's beard arrangement. He had wanted it trimmed fancy and unable to think of a real dude style told Angelo to fix it like the Smith Brothers. Obliging, Angelo had contrived to cut it with the high-points of both brothers' beards.

The giant came up the steps and took position self-consciously beside Steele, and after a space, allowed expansively, "Jim, that was a right smart idea we had to put up Miss Pokerbelle at Ma Kelley's."

"Well," Jim drawled, "I could see you didn't figure it would look right to press yore position as her backer by coming out with it."

Romanoff nodded weightily. "That was about it. It would have looked downright bold, coming from me." He gave a wondering, half-awed shake of his head. "It is the damdest—dangest, I mean—thing how the real ladies always turn to me!"

Steele shot him a bright look. The old crows-feet were growing deep and reaching from his eyes. "Yore a handsome and a trustworthy looking man, Bellowing!"

"Pshaw!" the giant grinned like a loon. "Not much more than you, Jim!" Some gnawing inward thought sobered him. "Course, I'm purty handy, and probably won't need siding, but some rough hombres on this range might get a mite out of hand and prove up too many for one man. And jist in case, and as a decent,

orderly man yoreself, I would like to count on you as friend if need be?"

Steele was rolling a stogy slowly between hard, calloused palms and now the movements stopped dead for a brief instant. He had a friendly liking for Romanoff, and a solid respect for his guts and fighting handiness, but he knew well that in a small way, the man had been rustling Coffeepot from time to time, and this was opportunity knocking.

He put the cigar between his lips and put a light to its tip, and expelling his first full puff with satisfaction, nodded. "Goes without saying. Man who'd help me as readily as you has got my siding any time."

Romanoff looked a little startled, a little confused, then took things with a chuckle. "Against Spanish Spur, I reckon? Well, I have a few old scores with Tyler myself, and never had anything but fair treatment off Zach Yates! As long as you are there, friend, you have my hand on that!"

He gave a nod of understanding agreement and drifted off on further sartorial business. Steele stood on, watching evening's softer light begin to slant across the rooftops, musing on the twists of fate that could shift and swing the division of range power around a wholly unrelated incident like the arrival of Pokerbelle. Three times part of Spur outfit drifted by giving him some hard looks, but restrained from any remarks or troublesome ideas, and secretly burning and shamed by the way their own boss had taken Steele out of their class and yet not settled things. Not even Larribee, the foreman, would have breasted Jim Steele singlehanded, but in a bunch, they might have roughed him up if opportunity presented, or pulled a few rope tricks when he was riding home alone. But now, anything even suspected of them would look as if done at Tyler's orders, and Tyler himself would give them hell for it.

Cold humor splintered silver lights from Steele's bleak eyes and he began to feel



an interest in his job again. Maybe this girl had brought him luck; maybe there would still be some fun before he quit the job and pulled up stakes.

HE STRETCHED and poked his hat forward on his head and spurred down-street to the upstairs hotel where he kept a room for his nights in town. The instant he swung back the door he sensed something wrong and knew somebody up to no good had been inside the room. He let the door swing back wide and keened the place but saw nothing immediately wrong. Purple shadows clung along two walls and in the corners, but golden light still made a path across the spur gouged floor, and crimson shades tinted the air and lay in solid bands along the gold.

He moved in cautiously, dimly noting that a thick, sweet smell of rattlesnake had penetrated here and vaguely thinking one of the damned things must have been hung on the yard wall for its stink to come through a closed window. Then he saw it, without sound, almost without movement, a scarce shifting of the lights and shadows along the corner of the floor.

His gun barked twice, kicking the long thick-nauseating body in the air and laying it down writhing with short, dim rattles. He flung up the window and used a chair leg to heave it out against the sun-down and stood looking after it thinking grimly that a man with a few drinks might not have noticed that smell, and might have yanked off his boots for a footwash or fallen into a dead slumber without ever suspecting that death lay in a corner.

He reloaded, tossed his hat upon a peg and hung his belt with a careful eye to his holster upon one iron bedpost. He heard cautious steps in the hall and waited, and then snapped open the door. Alessandro, who ran the hotel, fell back from the door in confused apology.

"Señor Drifting Jeem—I thought I

heard shots and came to help, mebbe!" the paunchy Mexican declared.

Jim Steele studied him acutely, noted the cocked pistol in his hand and the sincere worry in his eyes. He grinned and waved him away with his hand. "A rat," he explained.

The Mexican's round face wreathed with happy smiles. "So-o-ho, señor rat found the wrong room and geeve Señor Jeem a leetle target practice for supper?" he chuckled, and belting his gun turned back down the hall.

Jim Steele gave him five paces and then called, "There was a man here for me? To leave a package, Alessandro?"

"A man weeth a package, señor? No, nobody atall has come for you today. Nobody atall has even been up here yet."

Jim nodded and turned back into his room, crossing again to the window and looking below. Four feet down was a small iron shed roof that a man might reach from the saddle of a tall horse. He thought of Tyler, but Tyler was a short man and rode a small, fast pony, and he would be too smart to trust one of his men with orders for this kind of trick.

That left—practically every other ranch owner on the range! Jim considered with wry humor.

He stripped to the waist, poured water in the basin, and lathered and scrubbed at a lean sinewy torso that looked incredibly white against bronzed forearms and the solid black band at his neck. He shaved, wiped his face carefully, and set the bowl beside his bed to strip off boots and bathe hot feet. It was his one habitual luxury in a bone-dry world—he would ride two miles extra at the end of a day to bathe his feet, and there had been occasions when he needed fast footwork in a fight or when he came down afoot on the desert that this dudelike coddling of his hoofs had paid.

He built a smoke and lay back lazily, going over the more shifty of his personal,



and Coffeepot's, enemies, with the smell of the snake still a sickening sweet odor in his nostrils. It was not an ordinary trick, but then, Coffeepot was not an ordinary prize, and he was the solitary barrier against the big ranches crowding in where they wanted and the fringe and nester outfits running off whatever cows they fancied. There were men on the spread, eight out of the old thirty who had not yet quit, but they would be as useless without a foreman as—well, as a foreman was without the owner's authority and orders!

He reached the chair, propped it under the door handle, and rolled over for a nap. It was his first bed in a week, his first unhurried relaxation in four, and he sank into sleep with an outdoor man's primitive and almost sensual gratification.

It was dark, and the strike of creeping moonlight upon his eyelids that roused him, and he came instantly wide awake wondering what kind of dress the poker queen would be wearing.

He had his good suit there but after due consideration, he spurned it, satisfying himself with a clean outfit and softer boots and a coat that showed signs of age. Usually, at this time of a Saturday, he could stand here and listen to half a dozen arguments and fights, and the pound and spur-drag of boots along the board walk, and the wild yipping and pistol-burping of half-wild buckos in on their weekly spree. But tonight the town was strangely silent, and he wondered at it until he caught the nasal twang of Pop Meyers calling, "She just cleaned Rick Carree in one hour flat. There is a female knows how to judge cards, and men, mister."

He caught it then; Pokerbelle had snared the whole range in to gawk and walk like gasping fish into her game of poker. Oddly, he found himself suspecting she was a sharper, and more oddly, that it irritated him intensely to think she might be a slick dealer. Well, he had been wrong in one thing about her and

maybe he was wrong about this, but one thing was certain, if she could clean Rick Carree, she knew her poker.

He poked on his hat and slung his gun and made his way down the hotel's open outside stairs to the black hole of an alley and then into the islands of smoky yellow light falling out from bars and stores onto the main drag. A nickelodeon jangled dismally, and strangely, in Cono's almost deserted saloon, and in Jennifer's, two black shirted dealers were playing solitaire to while away the time. But Piute's was jammed from bar to wall and presented the amazing spectacle of a Waldoon crowd slicked and polished and fresh shaved—and coated and washed! It didn't matter how drunk Piute got tonight. He couldn't give away drinks as fast as the money clinked in.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Wanted—One Sidewinder

**H**E HAD a drink and moved with a second to wedge into the crowd around Pokerbelle's table, startled for a moment not so much by her beauty as the easy command she had over these rough men.

Tyler sat at the table, holding his own with nonchalance. It was something Steele had never noted in him before, but he had a smooth and flattering way with ladies, and it was clear his thoughts were on Pokerbelle. Across from Tyler, Hastings of the Lazy H was playing tight and losing steadily in spite of it, but holding in his rancor. These were the two ranchers putting the hardest squeeze on Coffeepot, the two hungriest for Coffeepot grass and power, and ruthless enough to get it with half a chance.

Prince Allicorn played his last chip on the hand and lost, and pushed back his chair with a wry laugh. "I have lost before," he grunted, "but never so willingly,



and certainly never to a better player!"

Bellowing Romanoff, resplendent with an enormous ring and scarf pin since Steele had seen him, was looking over the crowd to find who would bid highest for the vacant seat. He was just readying to accept Hap Hadley's signaled offer of twenty dollars when he saw Steele, and after a moment's inward struggle, looked at him with a gesture. It was a free offer, and a sign that the rowdy, roaring giant wanted that day's agreed friendship understood, and Steele took the offer in the same humor.

"Why now, Miz Pokerbelle," Hastings said with thin-edged humor as Steele seated himself, "this is the foreman of Coffee-pot that once boasted its fence lines were where it chose to graze! Goes by handle of Drifting Jim Steele, and has a habit, they say, of shooting at spooks whenever he gets indoors."

Hastings watched Steele with an acid light slapping from the surfaces of mean and cunning eyes. Steele nodded and murmured his pleasure, and then said, "Hastings left one thing out of that windstorm, Miss Pokerbelle—Coffee-pot's boast has never changed!"

He saw her eyes spark with appreciation at this blunt, challenging statement, and felt Hastings draw some personal meaning from it and harden in his considerations.

"Only thing about boasts is, they ain't wuth much without an owner to back 'em,

unless a foreman aims to get himself lynched," Tyler drawled. He said it smoothly, without getting personal about it, but wanting it to make its impression on the girl, which it did.

"Who is the owner?" the girl asked in rippling, silver tones while Romanoff counted out Steele's stack of chips.

"Zach Yates's niece and heir, a New England spinster named Abetha Yates," Steele answered briefly.

Hastings gave a snag-toothed chuckle. "This niece is a cross-eyed little flintlock was out here once long enough to pizen the country, m'am, before Zach could ship her back. I reckon he left her the place because she was his next of living kin, for there ain't no other reason I can think on!"

The girl's gaze hung on Steele questioningly. "Well, for once, Hastings is reasonably right, I reckon," he admitted. "Mebbe Zach figured that with enough cattle and graze, she could rope off a man." He shot a glance of rough, hard humor at Tyler. "Tyler, that is a way you could make real sure of the Broken Buttes graze," he grinned.

"If you ain't had her murdered quietly," the rancher rasped. "One thing is sure, you are being mighty careful not to cause her to come out from the East, mister!"

"Crowd Coffee-pot hard enough and she will have too!" Steele said on a flat note. "That might be an easy way to snag you

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a wife and all of Coffeepot at the same time, Tyler, and give me a chance to get shet of a whole lot of things beside this jackjob!"

"You ain't suffering any!" the rancher snapped.

The girl's knuckles rapped the table. "Feuding doesn't get the ante up, gentlemen!" she remarked crisply.

A regular gambling queen would have said "boys" not "gentlemen," but she still played a wicked game of poker, and again Steele felt perplexity stream through him. There was something phoney here, and he couldn't put his finger on it; but he hated phonies, and he particularly hated phoni-ness in her.

He played along, studying her game behind a mask of careless indolence, then suddenly settled down to build the game and drive her. Hastings dropped and nine other men were cleaned, part by her luck and play, and part because their minds were on the girl and not the game. Tyler's luck was spotty but held him from losing badly, and Steele played tight, but driving the pots up systematically.

A message came for Tyler that pulled him out about even at four o'clock, and the other last player pulled out with him. The girl dropped out of her prim position for the first time, leaning forward against the table. Her eyes were very dark and very steady and glanced the light from their surfaces in the way of polished dark metal.

"You play hard, even against ladies, Jim," she commented.

He met her gaze, but couldn't probe it. He nodded. "I play to win," he said. "That is the game, isn't it?"

"At everything?" she asked.

He made a gesture. "Might as well make it a policy."

She laughed then, low but outright. She threw back her head and her long lashes drooped, and her eyes mocked him. "Have you played to win Coffeepot?" she asked quietly. "I understand it is not hard for

a man in your position to simply take things over."

He scowled. "I wouldn't take it as a gift! I wouldn't be tied down there a day more than I had to!"

"Not even as master, as you suggested to Tyler?"

"With that worm-headed little cuckoo clock?" he demanded. "M'am, I have been staying on fer just one thing—the loyalty I owed to Zach Yates! The day the owner gets here is the day I quit."

"Maybe that little cuckoo clock is no longer worm-headed," she suggested.

"It wouldn't matter," he growled, "if she was queen of Sheba. I wasn't born to get rooted, and I wouldn't take the worrying that goes with roots for all the money that's in it."

"You'd be no man for a woman then," she murmured.

"Yo're danged right I wouldn't," Jim barked, irritated for reasons beyond him. "I'm no hombre to sell his freedom for some featherhead."

Her eyes sparked and sudden enmity hung between them, unexplainable, unaccountable, and irritating him further. He nodded and cashed his winnings, and stopped at the bar for a nightcap.

"On me, m'friend!" Piute beamed at him alcoholically. "All the drinks you can down from now to dawn are on the house!"

STEELE laid down a coin without cracking a smile and moved out into the fluid, shifting darkness and almost audible chill. A few drunken waddies still cussed or stumbled around or were singing badly; but in general the town had drunk full and well, but politely, that night, and things were quiet down to the deadfalls.

He stood on the top step thinking of returning to his hotel, and then out of need for physical exercise decided on riding back to the ranch. He had no misgivings,



he felt no danger, but he was filled with the feel of grit, and he could not shut off the echo of the girl's voice from circling inside his head like sound inside a bell. She was either some wild little filly broken loose from a good stable and having her day in the brush before she got in trouble, or something dead set phoney, but not concerning him; either way, he wanted no part of her.

Not until he was crossing Sweetgrass Meadows and looked up to see the black silhouettes of cattle lined against the smudged gray and yellow dawn as they swept through the saddle of Concho Pass did his thoughts of her end. All of the irritation that had been building in him suddenly gathered into dangerous pools of violence as his eyes went grim. Those doggies were thick and close together and being drifted from behind and from the sides. There was only one place for them to come from, and that was Spanish Spur, and only one place for them to go to, and that was onto Coffee pot's prime mountain-cured grass.

This was it, then, the time he had dreaded for Coffeepot with the owner absent, but the time he had waited with impatience for himself. This was the beginning of the real crowding, the slow strangling of the old lord's holdings and power, and the taking of his water and grass. But Tyler had not started his crowd on Broken Buttes—they were still afraid of Drifting Jim Steele personally, then!

There was bad news too at the ranch. Yesterday had been payday, and three more of his outfit had taken advantage of his absence to quit and haul tail.

He sat down with a cup of java and scrawled a curt telegram requesting Miss Abetha Yates's immediate presence. He sealed that in an envelope and wrote a separate letter explaining tersely that she was about to lose her fortune and requesting permission until she got there to use his own discretion. Both letter and

telegram would go by stage to Albuquerque where one would hit the wires and the other the rails.

He fretted irritably through a full month with no answer of any kind, unable, short as he was of help, to properly work Coffeepot's own herds, let alone drive the encroaching ones back. Six times he rode into town, giving himself the excuse of looking for the answers which did not come, but always arriving so as to give himself a little play with Pokerbelle before the night stage shook in.

It was hard play, grim play, with all of his fraying temper in it, and something else, a determination to break her luck, to wipe that knowing mockery from her gaze. He won, but never heavily enough for that, but he did have the luck of being hazed by Hastings directly about the snake.

His head snapped up and his eyes went bleak. Nobody had known about the shots but Alessandro, and he had told him they were for a rat. But Hastings gave him a dig about murdering the pore trusting sidewinders he slept with, and Steele asked with deadly quiet, "What makes you think that?"

Hastings' eyes pinched with realization that he had slipped and that contrary to what most would have done, Steele must not have told anyone of this. But he was a quick man with cunning and he managed to grin, "Why, half the town heard you banging around up in the hotel the night Pokerbelle came in, and that stinking carcass down in the yard next morning sure didn't shoot itself, friend!"

"Somebody sure must of been looking for something that stank to pry around in that junkpile of a Sunday morning!" Steele rasped. He held his gaze straight and thin and challenging on Hastings, but he had no more than this to go by, and Hastings wiggled clear.

"One of my boys danged near slept off his drunk atop of it!" the rancher cackled.



"Sure," Steele nodded. "Just the way some tall hombre with a tall boss meant me to, but while it was crawling." His eyes gave off a shine like silver bullets, and violence slammed out of him like a yell. "Hastings," he said with flat, immobile lips. "Yo're a mighty tall man, but it will not take a long grave to hold you!"

"That sounds like a threat!" Hastings bridled.

"It is!" Steele answered metallically. "And one I'll make good if any Lazy H doggies are on Coffeepot tomorrow sundown!"

"Strays!" the rancher growled, but with a tightness in his tone. "We've got an agreement on that and you know it, Steele! Don't get out of place around here or a few ranchers I happen to know would just as soon wire yore boss to replace you!"

Pokerbelle's rich, musical voice broke their anger like silver chimes. "I thought you gentlemen came here to play poker?"

"Why yes," Hastings agreed with alacrity, and plumped down.

Steele pivoted and gave her one long, blazing look, and stomped out of the bar. But her soft laughter followed him; it was still ranking in him when he got home.

HE WAITED impatiently another week for word from the owner, and then filled with hell and vinegar, rode in purposely intending to get rip-roaring drunk. He had almost forgotten about it, but the town was talking nothing else. This was the night of the Cowbells Stall Party, the annual box party that heralded new engagements on the range, and brought together some of the more bashful folk. It was not the wild and robust event of Roundup Shivarree, but it was the big social event with mothers clucking like hens over lost chicks and gimlet-eyeing every man who came for some daughter's opportunity.

It was the respectable element's night, and Respectful with a big R, and the big talk in town was that no matter how respectable the boys considered Miss Pokerbelle, no woman who gambled and associated with strange men, their men, particularly, in a common bar, was respectable. None of the women had asked her, and none of the men dared.

That was the talk he heard before he even swung into Piute's, and his gaze fell on Tyler, talking with three rancher cronies down the bar. "It is a damned shame," Tyler was allowing, knowing it would be repeated. "And except for some important business, I would favor her myself!"

Tyler had been making a play for the girl, and making some progress of sorts, Steele judged, since he had twice seen them in a rig driving out to view the sundown from Indian Leap. But he didn't believe Tyler meant this, and neither did Bellowing Romanoff, who lifted his head from a dim corner tabel to roar thickly, "That is hogwash and I will tear the man apart who says not! Nobody aims to favor my angel pardner!" He babbled on drunkenly until his head banged back down like a sack of bricks.

Piute came down with Steele's bottle, nodding toward the drunken giant. "Taking this real hard," he allowed. "He ain't big enough on this range to breast that crowd of big ranchers' womenfolk, and he's shamed to face Pokerbelle when he can't take her. I been trying to keep him peaceable with a quart every now and then so he don't go berserk."

Steele looked at the lights splintering through the dark red liquor in his glass and suddenly his slat mouth jerked in a wicked grin. Every damned rancher saving Tyler who was licking his chops for some piece of Coffeepot would be there, and like it or not, the man who purposely baited a fight with Steele at this point pulled the gun that would start the range



ablaze with war. If there was any one, or any clique, figured they were strong enough to do it, this was the time to smoke them out. If not, by indirection and affront, taking the girl there would reassert some of Coffeepot's slipping authority.

Another thing, and this appealed to him most, she would not dare excuse herself or it would kill her self-assured, grand lady act, but he was damned sure those angry ranchers' women would find a way to make her squirm.

He felt mean and vicious and vindictive for reasons he did not understand, and it was in his chuckle and the set of his jaw as he downed his drink and swung out with a long stride for Ma Kelley's. He went around the kitchen way and heard Ma stoking stove inside, and from custom, simply walked on in.

Ma was there, presenting a perfectly round view as she bent at the stove, but it was not this ludicrous sight that stopped and held him. It was the turbaned and ash-daubed girl wielding the enormous iron with the same dexterity she handled cards. Pokerbelle was helping Ma Kelley with the wash.

She darted him a surprised and instantly self-conscious woman's glance, but he was too addled to catch that fleeting moment, and in the next, she had read him and she had him at her command. "Well," she tilted, eyes dancing with deviltry, "we're honored at the generosity of a visit from Coffeepot's masterful foreman!"

Ma lifted a beet-red face and wiped a blunt nose on an arm the size of a log. "The hell we are," she corrected. "I used to scrub him naked along with the clothes!" She reached the coffeepot and commanded, "All right, get set and get out of busy folk's way, Jim! Belle, you fetch the ornery goat some of that pie you made."

That put him in his place and he was

pretty humble, and it was danged hard, after half a pie, to ask a girl to a box party just out of meanness. He sat leaning on his knees, scowling at the floor. He felt suddenly lower than a snake and he muttered the thought upon his mind unconsciously, "Hell, I can't ask to take you somewhere jist for spite."

The mockery broke from her eyes. The pupils sprang wide, and then narrowed like a cat's, and yet they filled with a glow that was very soft and very feminine. "Why couldn't you ask me somewhere's else then, Jim?" she asked.

"No, by gum, Miss Pokerbelle, I aim to take you jist where I first meant, but different-like, if you've got the mind to come!"

Her whole face filled with turbulent deviltry. "The box party, Jim?"

He made a suddenly doubtful gesture. "But mebbe you don't want to mix with all that cattiness?"

Her laugh was rich and full and held the reckless challenge and daring of the range-bred. "No, I'd love it! We'll give 'em yore dose of Coffeepot—with pepper added."

He looked at her with a man's eternal wonder at the hidden things that lie in women. "Except for age and who you are," he said, "that could have been old Zach's daughter. She died back quite a bit."

For a moment, her eyes shimmered softly at the compliment and then she was laughing at some secret plan and shooin' him out the door. He came to fetch her in a rented rig an hour before sundown, and she had her box packed, but so carefully covered he could not guess the looks of it. That meant of course that if he did not spot it, some other hombre might bid and win her for supper at the box auction, and he scowled at that thought, mentioning it.

She laughed mischievously. "That would give them something even tougher



to take, so why worry?" she asked him.

"Just us will be tough enough!" he stated flintily.

"Don't worry, Jim; if you don't recognize it, yore no fit man to run Coffeepot!" she teased him.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Sundown Showdown

THEIR arrival was the complete explosion he'd expected. It practically wrecked the party. There were instant huddles of indignant mothers, and arrogant, yet jealous, looks from the young ladies. The menfolk moved as far as possible from the reach of flushed-faced wives, scowling and grumbling to one another, but knowing precisely why Steele had done this, and awkward in the face of it.

True, he was only a foreman and without an owner on hand for authority, and so short-handed as to offer no real danger in his own outfit. But Coffeepot's feudal loyalties reached far back into that country's roots and twisted through many a ranch and family, and there were lesser feuds than the big one of crowding and taking over Coffeepot, and open range war might find Coffeepot drawing considerable fealty. And then, there was Drifting Jim Steele himself, who had never given a damn for anything, including his own life, but particularly not for the life of another man, and he was fast and dangerous as a rattler when roused.

No, the men decided, this was too pat not to be wide open to suspicion. If Coffeepot's foreman was throwing an affront like this into their assembled faces, he had his lines out and was too ready for an excuse to start things. And so, one by one, they cooled their women down to simmering, and a few of the bachelors, without so much to lose, were designated to pay their respects to the gambling queen.

The wave of animosity died down through sunset, but swept up again dangerously with every young girl's fear that Pokerbelle's box might win the auction of her own beau. Some of the younger, wilder bucks had tanked up in the horse shed and were beginning to move with fighting stiffness in their joints and a growing recklessness in their eyes.

Pokerbelle caught the smell of trouble and offered Jim his out. "We've had most of the fun now," she told him. "I'd just as soon go."

"No," he told her, and the old crows-feet of wild humor were deep and sharp beside his eyes. "The real fun ain't begun yet!"

She thought of something as the auctioneer nervously began the auction to try and avert trouble. "Maybe you're right," she said.

Most of these boxes had been uncovered before turnover to the auctioneer, but now he came to one he had to undo himself, and this was on a platform in front of the whole crowd. He had an idea it was Hettie Bottel's, a popular girl, and he pitched his spiel with that in mind while he was untying the package. He stopped dead suddenly and stared, and then as if stung out of a freeze, almost jerked the offering from its cover, and held up a big, two-gallon, range coffeepot.

There was a dead silence, and men who had been giving Steele increasingly hard looks suddenly congealed. The auctioneer had to clear his throat twice to wheeze a bad joke, "Well, here is a chance for you gents to bid in Coffeepot cheap!"

Nobody uttered a sound; no man peeped.

Jim grinned and had his moment of watching this challenge, which he would not have thought of, thrown flat into their faces, and sensing their anger and shame that no man had the guts to start the ridicule and roundabout insults the opportunity offered. Then he sang out



"Fifty dollars!" and the auctioneer ran through his two more demands for a better offer like it was a race, and couldn't hold it out fast enough for Jim to swing through the crowd and take.

The silence was growing explosive and somebody had to say something to break the tension, and with strained effort, the auctioneer managed reedily, "That is a mighty handsome price to get a great spread for, Jim!"

Steele was handing over his money and taking Pokerbelle's box by then, and he was half turned to the whole crowd as he said clearly, "The only spread I want is the one goes with that bid!"

He turned to them, and some of them thought that old Zach Yates fire and arrogance was momentarily in his eyes, and then he said on a mocking, scornful note that none missed, "Boys, you missed yore chance to buy the handsomest supper on this range real cheap tonight!"

He looked square at them, and let the cold lights of his taunting gaze touch and search them one by one. Not a man moved his gaze from where it was riveted. If it happened to collide, he looked right through Jim Steele without apparent expression.

Steele grunted and swung with his long stride back through the crowd, and taking Pokerbelle's arm, led her out to their buggy. It had been a tense two hours, and on trail he turned to search the pale oval of her face for some sign of relief reaction. But she was laughing with all of the same reckless wild humor that had once been his.

They forked off onto Coffeepot and drove up through the blue-black shadows of tiered hills, and sat with the warm fragrant smell of night upon the desert drifting up to them.

"You're in danger, Jim," she said to him. "I know—a woman hears a lot playing cards. They would have come after you a month ago except no one

man had the guts to spearhead. But that can't last."

"No," he agreed. "Spanish Spur and Lazy H are both crowding badly."

She turned and studied him in the dim starlight. "What will you do? You've left them no out now—it is fight or crawl for them."

"We did that," he corrected with a chuckle, kicking the big coffeepot. "Well, I am ready for it. I sent a last wire east today to give me authority or I quit."

"You did?" she asked on a startled note. "What will the owner—this worm-head girl—answer to that?"

He shrugged. "Quit then, probably. But I threw my challenge and if no man takes me up by then, I can ride with nothing on my conscience . . . except sometime to put the sting of a rattlesnake into one man."

SHE was silent a long time after that; so long that he looked down to see if she had dozed upon his shoulder. "I've been thinking of drifting out myself," she told him.

She lifted her face. The moon was rising and showering down a primitive red-yellow light, and what he saw on her face was no longer the prim, cool, self-how turned gambling queen, but the ex-assurance of a schoolmarm who had somepression of a woman who is afraid she may be doubted.

"You don't think I'm on the level, Jim. You don't know anything about me!"

"All I need to know I saw tonight," he chuckled. "Belle, we'll drop that Poker handle if yore minded and get hitched, real and legal, either way my cards turn."

He caught the catch of her breath and sensed the flood of poignancy the words brought through her. She was crying when he tipped up her chin, but she shook her head.

"You don't want marriage and responsibilities!" she cried tightly. "They'd tie



you and you'd fester just like you're doing under Coffeepot's bridle, Jim!"

He scowled out into the dark. "It would be different with us," he muttered. "Yo're a woman can ride at a man's pace, Belle." A random thought froze him and out of this he looked around at her sharply. "Or has some other man asked?"

"Tyler," she admitted, "has been serious, but I gave no answer."

"Tyler!" he exploded on a breath.

"He is an arrogant man, an ambitious man, a ruthless man, Jim—but he would treat a woman well."

"Yes," he admitted grudgingly. "And he is a good rancher."

They sat on a space, but the spell of closeness was broken and after a time she made the suggestion and he gave no argument at starting the drive back to town.

That was Thursday, and on Monday morning he sat on a high shelf overlooking Coffeepot and watched nine separate wedges of dust-smoke slowly converging upon Coffeepot graze. The range had battled details out and come to its decision and agreement, and now the combined ranches were moving in to try to force the issue.

High humor should have filled him, but he found nothing in this long-hoped-for battle but a grim discontent that it had come this late. He would fight, of course, but he was hamstrung without an owner and without the owner's authority to make deals with allying ranchers, and a pitched battle would chop Coffeepot to less than a third its size as things stood. Even without a battle, with no authority, it was but a matter of two, maybe three years, before the crowding gobbled up the best grass and water.

He cursed and put his horse downtrail for the ranch and found a special rider from town just bringing out his return telegram. He ripped it open and blanched at the reply:

TAKE SIX MONTHS PAY AND APPOINT A SUITABLE SUCCESSOR UNTIL MY EARLY ARRIVAL YOU WON'T QUIT YOU'RE FIRED. ABETHA YATES.

He lifted his head and glared at the messenger. "This is one hell of a time for this! Every man on the range will swear I was scared out!" He didn't expect it to make sense; it was but a vocal expression of his anger.

A brightness came into the man's eyes and then he hastily wheeled his gaze away. "I don't reckon they'll think that, Jim," he allowed carefully, "if that message is what I reckon. She sent another one to the sheriff making things good and clear, and he tacked it up in town."

"Let's go!" Jim growled.

Half the town was still in front of that other telegram when he hit dirt and shouldered through the crowd. This other telegram, addressed to the sheriff read:

JIM STEELE NO LONGER MY FOREMAN AFTER THIS SUNDOWN AND WITHOUT ANY AUTHORITY FOR ACTION AFTER IMMEDIATE APPOINTMENT OF A SUITABLE SUCCESSOR. ARRIVING THIS WEEK IN PERSON TO TAKE OVER. ABETHA YATES.

"After a year and a half, she's arriving a week too late!" Jim grated. His jaw set like an anvil and the crowd gave way and had the good sense not to follow him down to Piute's.

He had four fast drinks without even feeling the raw heat of the whiskey, and was pouring a fifth when Bellowing Romanoff thundered in. The giant had discarded the fancy dude rig he had been wearing as a prosperous pardner of the gambling queen, and was back in chaps and spurs with two guns on and his belts loaded.

Violence and wild humor drifted out of him like two mixed smells. He poured a shot and lifted his glass. "To our fight, pardner!"



Steele snapped him an angry look. "Ain't you seen the telegram?"

"For certain," Romanoff nodded, and grinned. "That makes it jist you and me agin the whole bunch, on our own, don't it."

Appreciation softened Steele's raw humor, until he suddenly grinned and chuckled. "Going to keep that agreement come hell or high water, eh, Bellowing? Well, before that, how could you like to be new ramrod of Coffeepot with a dude woman for boss and the whole damned range moving in on you? It is a full size job, but the pay is triple what anyone else would give you, and you are not under the obligations to the brand that I was working under."

Bellowing Romanoff's ugly face fell into a look of childish wonder at this luck. They palavered and struck the deal and Piute bought a drink as witness.

"Now," Steele grunted with sudden cool containment, "you may not cotton to this other deal so easy, so get yore trigger finger limbered!"

Bellowing Romanoff stared at him, and suddenly set the rafters shaking with his full-chested laughter. "That? She's done already told me!" He waved a hand the size of a picket mallet.

It was Steele's turn to stare. "She told you what?"

"About that buggy ride," Romanoff grunted appreciatively.

"About getting hitched?" Steele demanded.

"No, she didn't say that. She jist said how she felt about you. But about getting hitched, I dunno but what you won't have to kind of clear the way first with another gent whose down at Cono's—"

"Ah!" Steele breathed through his teeth, and his face filled with wicked light. "With eight tough hombres."

Steele sucked a full breath into his lungs and flexed his long, lean body and pivoted on one heel for the door. Behind him he heard Romanoff's unhesitating steps, and behind Romanoff the bang of Piute landing in a vault across the bar.

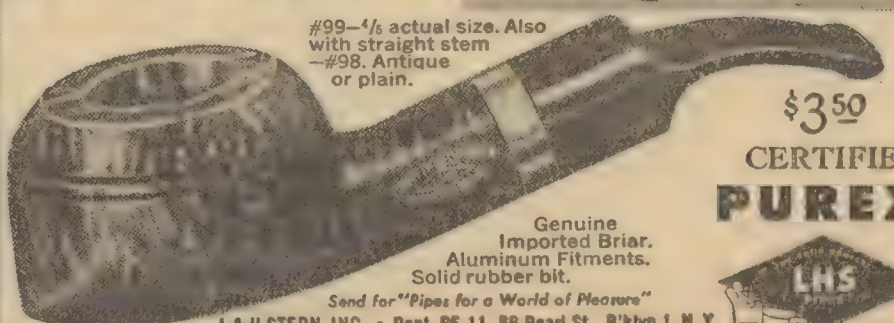
HE MOVED with grim determination for Cono's, banging the doors back and striding on towards the gimlet-eyed group already at gun clearance from the bar. Their eyes darted beyond him to the two powerful men who followed and spread to each side.

Tyler said tersely, "So you brought yore army? But it is not enough. Every man here is as fast as you, Steele."

He leaned back against the bar himself and regarded the fired ramrod with a mixture of cagey respect and scorn. "It is a funny thing you got fired right at this time," he chuckled.

"Damned funny!" Steele snapped. "The rest of you coyotes sent a telegram of protest and she swallowed it?"

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"You should know!" Tyler mocked him with self-approval. "But we don't aim to make war on a woman. We'll get all our business settled and Coffeepot's new fence lines agreed before she ever gets here!"

Romanoff opened his beard to speak, considered suddenly that he owed nothing to Coffeepot until he received orders, and if a man could have a lush job without making enemies, why not?

The sheriff strolled in, bleached eyes wary but determined. Two deputies trailed behind him, fanning out to both sides. The sheriff said, "Jim, kinda looks like yore sort of back to drifting after sundown, don't it?"

"A heap can happen before sundown!" Steele rasped, and saw the quick dilation of Tyler's eyes. The stocky rancher waited a space, but found quick opportunity to move out from the bar. He was not afraid, but weighed every factor—a man who did not take risks unless he had to.

Steele's lungs were working like a bellows. "You may be lucky, Tyler," he said. "There is another, lower, sidewinder I need to see hereabouts before you!"

"Boys!" the sheriff said peaceably, but it was a signal to his men.

"Yes, boys," Romanoff boomed, and they looked with surprise into his two guns.

Violence hung like shimmering heat through the whole room. There was the soft, whoosh of the door being carefully opened and Piute's quiet, "Okay, Jim," and then the light tap of a woman crossing the floor.

Belle moved in midway between Tyler and Steele. She was angry and she lashed them both with the fury of her eyes. "I thought both of you better sports than this!" she snapped.

Tyler was quick at that. He spread his hands. "I've got nine prime gunmen and I've not breasted him yet, Belle."

Steele was looking at her with bitter

reproach. "Why didn't you tell me Tyler was yore man?"

She bit her lower lip. "I don't know yet if I am saying yes to him or you!"

"Belle," Tyler said weightily, "I didn't know there had been anything between you two. It might change things."

She gave him a penetrating look. "You want to back out of it?"

"I don't back out of things," he grunted. "But there is a possibility that you might like to. Mebbe you would rather ride out with Steele than stay, and mebbe a man would be a fool to pick a useless, losing fight in choice to happiness with you."

It was a statement that would be repeated on the range to show his generosity and sportsmanship, and wouldn't hurt him either with another woman when Coffeepot's new owner came! But Belle saw through it, and then her scorn settled.

"Yes," she murmured torridly. "If I had my choice and Jim has not changed his mind, I would ride out with him now!" She turned to Steele. "Just ride with you, Jim. I would have to decide on the rest, the other, on the way."

His jaws were like rocks pressing under pressure.

"Why light up the range over hurt pride, Jim?" the sheriff asked. "Things will be bad enough as is; it's not yore job any longer and it will not do you any good."

Piute said with heartfelt conscience, "I should have had served ye drinks before sundown! The sheriff's right, Jim, ye've got no right making trouble now that yer through at Coffeepot. This all started over the ranch."

"Yeah!" Jim broke out on a sour, bitter snort. "I reckon so. Well, I hope Zach don't curse me from down there!" He turned to the girl with all of the violence and mayhem burned out of him. "You ready to ride now?"

She nodded and turned with him through the doors.



NOT a word was spoken between them for a full twenty miles. He said wearily then, "Four miles in to Castro, Belle. We can get proper hitched up there."

She did not look at him; she held her head down and straight ahead. "I haven't said yes yet, Jim," she murmured. "I haven't set my mind yet; there is more to it than just loving you."

"You have got just four miles to set it," he grunted acidly.

She looked around at his tone.

"I'm turning back," he said glumly. "I will marry you and I will come and fetch you if I pull through, Belle. But that Yates girl doesn't know what she is getting into and there is nobody for her to turn to."

A look crossed the girl's face. "But she won't turn to you after she gets the telegram."

He shrugged. "Then I'll fight alone, and clear some of the coyotes from her door, in any case. I owe that to old Zach. I thought I could quit, but I can't. It's a bounden debt and responsibility."

A queer amusement and maternal understanding of a man's contrariness and idealism danced in her eyes. "Maybe now this young worm-headed cuckoo clock will marry you for saving her," she suggested.

He cut the air with the side of his hand. "I don't want that. I have never wanted any other woman. I will marry you or

none, but there is the town right over that hill."

She looked down at her pony's neck, her smile hidden by the shadow. "Very well, Jim."

"It's a fine thing, marrying a woman and having to ride right out on her?"

"But you won't be," she murmured.

He turned to glare at her. "Don't get this wrong—I don't soften!"

"I haven't got you wrong, Jim," she said. "You won't ride out on me because I'm riding with you."

He reined his horse up. "You can't go back there to wait, with me prowling the range like a lobo! They'll have me outlawed as soon as they find out!"

She looked up at that, laughing at him. "How can they outlaw you for protecting yore own property, Jim? I suppose it's yours after we're married, isn't it? On account of I'm the worm-headed cuckoo clock you've been sending those dumb wires and letters to, you darned lunkhead! I'm Abetha Yates, and I spent a whole year studying poker just so I could come out proper and learn the trouble for myself, and if you had any danged memory I didn't have buck teeth, and—"

Enlightenment descended upon Steele and put sudden life and good humor back upon his gloomy face. "Sure!" he breathed with surging memories, "I remember now they weren't buck at all—they just stuck straight out, didn't they, honey?"





# WHILE BULLETS WAIT

*Can a second-best  
lawman beat a first-  
class gunslick—for  
the last waiting grave  
in boothill?*

CARL HOOPER sat quietly on the porch of the doctor's office, awaiting Edwards' verdict. He was a tall man, slender. His skin was deeply tanned. He was thirty-five but he looked older. This afternoon he felt older. A man riding up the street waved to him and called a greeting. Carl waved in reply but made no other answer. He watched the man, a cow-hand named Davis, pull in at the tie-rail in front of the Casa Grande saloon, find a place for his horse, then hurry inside. The scowl on Carl's face deepened.

Doc Edwards came out on the porch. He looked well pleased with himself. "It was one of the easiest operations I ever performed," he said to Carl. "He'll be on his feet in a week."

A great load slid from Carl Hooper's shoulders. He stood up, grinning. He said, "When can I see him, doc?"

"Right now," said Edwards. "Go on in, but don't stay too long."

Carl entered the doctor's office and crossed to one of the back hospital rooms. Arne Blake was lying in the bed, his eyes closed. His face was deeply wrinkled. He was a man close to sixty. When he had had a sudden attack of appendicitis a

few hours before and when Doc Edwards had decided to operate, Carl had worried that Blake might not pull through the operation. He told himself, now, that he should have known better. Arne Blake was as tough as they came.

Blake's eyes opened. He scowled at Carl. He said, "Well, what are you grinning at. Maybe you think this was fun."

"I'm thinking you'll rest for a while," Carl answered. "You're about to get part of the vacation you would never take."

"I'll worry myself to death," Blake muttered. "Look who I'm leaving in charge of things."

Arne Blake was the sheriff of Pine Bluff county. Carl was his deputy. Carl chuckled. He said, "I'll do all right."

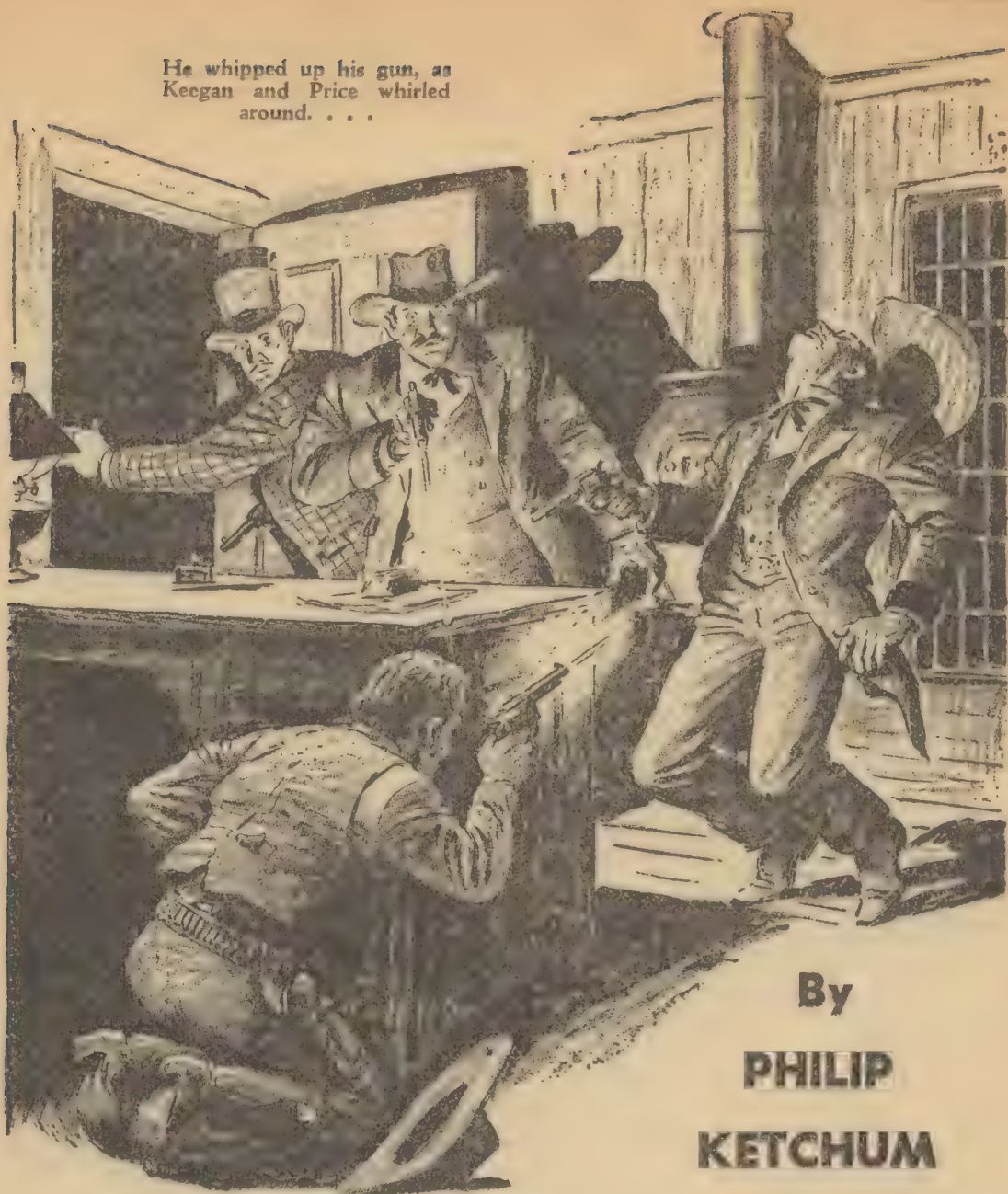
"You'll still take orders," said Blake gruffly. "You'll take orders or I'll get up out of this bed and beat you."

Carl was grinning. He said, "Sure I will, chief. Sure I will. I just love to take orders."

They got along, these two, about as well as men ever get along. There had never been a misunderstanding between them. They had a mutual respect for each other which made a misunderstanding impossible.



He whipped up his gun, as  
Keegan and Price whirled  
around. . . .



By

PHILIP

KETCHUM

"Let that Casa Grande matter ride," said Orne Blake, and there was now a serious note in his voice. "In a week I'll be on my feet again. Not much can happen in a week."

"Sure," Carl agreed. "Not much can happen in a week."

"I don't want you bucking that Casa Grande crowd alone," Arne Blake continued. "You've got a family to think of."

Carl kept the grin on his face. There was no point in arguing with Arne Blake, but he wasn't so sure the Casa Grande situation could ride for a week.

The faintly smothered sound of gunfire reached into the room. Carl stiffened, then tried to hide this from Arne Blake. "I'll drop around an' see you later," he promised. "Take it easy, chief."

Arne Blake looked worried. "Remem-



ber what I told you," he called. "Play it wise, Carl. I don't want to have to break in another deputy."

Men from both directions were heading toward the Casa Grande as Carl came out on the street. He moved swiftly toward the saloon, his feet scuffing up clouds of gray dust from the street. At the saloon door he heard what had happened. There had been another shooting in the Casa Grande. A man was dead. Carl pushed inside. The saloon was jammed. At the far end, near an overturned table, a silent group of men stood around a motionless figure on the floor. From these men, most of whom he knew, Carl got the story. The dead man was Lou Halstead. He worked at the Bar Anchor ranch. He had been sitting in one of the games. He had accused Andy Norbert, one of the house men, of cheating. He had gone for his gun. He had drawn first. Norbert had a clear case of self-defense.

Carl Hooper turned away. He crossed the saloon to a door in the rear. A sign on the door read: PRIVATE OFFICE. DO NOT ENTER. Carl knocked on the door. He waited a moment, then opened it and stepped inside.

The man seated back of the desk was thin, hunched, and might have been fifty. He had a pale, colorless skin. His name was Frank Stewart. He leased the Casa Grande from the man who owned it and who had formerly operated it, and who had retired a few months before. Stewart, so far as Carl had observed, had only two facial expressions. One was the dead-pan stare of the professional gambler. The other was a smile, forced, cold and unfriendly. The smile never stayed long on his lips. It came now, and then was gone.

"Hello, deputy," said Frank Stewart. "Can I do something for you?"

Carl nodded. He closed the door. He moved up to the desk and stood there looking down at Stewart. He said, "Yes, you can. You can close down."

Stewart got to his feet. He moved around to the door. He opened it. "Get Harry Price and Rock Keegan," he said to someone beyond the door.

CARL HOOPER had expected some such move as this. The two men Stewart had sent for were his chief helpers. Keegan was a big man, handy with both his fists and his guns. Price was a seasoned gambler, cold, deadly, a man without any surface emotions.

"Maybe Harry and the Rock will be interested in what you have to say," Stewart mentioned as he came back to his desk. "They're good men, sheriff. They're stubborn men. When necessary, they can be tough to handle."

Carl shrugged his shoulders. He made no comment. He waited, standing perfectly still. He didn't seem at all worried. He knew what he had to do. He had known since he had stepped into the saloon. Things couldn't wait for Arne Blake's recovery.

Rock Keegan and Harry Price came in together. Price nodded to Carl Hooper. He had a thin, expressionless face which matched Stewart's. Rock Keegan, a bigger man, scowled.

"All right, deputy," Stewart invited. "Speak your piece."

"I will," said Carl Hooper bluntly. "The laws of this county place in the hands of the sheriff the right to license establishments in which liquor is sold and where there is gambling. The sheriff, also, has the right to revoke licenses, when, in his opinion, a place is not properly operated. This Arne Blake explained to you, Stewart, when you leased the Casa Grande. He told you the things for which he would not stand. One was the use of professional gamblers as house-men. One was the promotion of high stake games. One was fighting. I could name others but that's enough. Three men have been killed in gun-fights in the last two weeks."



"Cut it short," said Frank Stewart harshly.

"I will," Carl nodded. "This morning Arne Blake told you that at midnight, tonight, your license to operate a saloon would be revoked. I expect you to close down by midnight."

"Have you been promoted, deputy?" asked Stewart.

"I am acting for Arne Blake," said Carl Hooper. "He gave the order. I'll carry it out."

Frank Stewart pulled in a long, slow breath. He shook his head. "We will not close down."

"Then I will close the saloon for you," said Carl.

Again Stewart shook his head. "The men around here like the Casa Grande. You'll live longer, deputy—a lot longer—if you let things ride."

"Midnight, Stewart," said Carl Hooper. "You have until midnight to close down. My only purpose in talking to you now is to let you know that the sheriff's illness makes no difference in the order he gave."

"Let's settle this now," said Rock Keegan. He moved forward. His fists were clenched. His breath made a hissing sound between his teeth. Carl watched him, narrowly.

"No, Rock. Not now," said Stewart. "There's no hurry."

Carl Hooper shrugged his shoulders. He turned toward the door. He opened it and moved into the saloon. He crossed to the street door and stepped outside. He was frowning. He had a feeling he hadn't carried this off as well as Arne Blake would have done. He walked slowly down the street toward the sheriff's office, a tall, tired-looking man, wholly absorbed in his own thoughts, worried about what lay ahead, wishing that he had Arne Blake's wisdom to guide him. This morning, never anticipating an attack of appendicitis, Arne Blake had told Stewart that at midnight his license to run a saloon would

be cancelled. He and Arne had expected that there might be some trouble. Considering this, it might have been wise to wait until Arne Blake was on his feet again. But in view of the shooting this afternoon, he couldn't wait. The Casa Grande had become a cancerous spot which cost men their lives. It had to be closed down.

At five thirty, after a talk with Stub Knowles and Guy Webber concerning a water dispute in the south valley, Carl Hooper left the sheriff's office and started home for supper. Low clouds hung over the sky. The promise of snow was in the air. In another hour it would be dark.

Carl followed his usual route home. He cut between the Boston store and the bank, angled across a vacant lot on First street and headed toward the school. He was near the corner when he heard someone behind him, call, "Hey, Hooper! Wait a minute."

Carl stopped. He turned. At the edge of the vacant lot he saw a man's figure. He saw the man's arms lift as he brought a rifle to his shoulder. Carl dived for the ground, reaching for his gun as he fell. He heard the scream of the rifle shot which passed just above him. He steadied his arm. He fired, then fired again.

The man with the rifle straightened. He took a step forward. He stumbled and went to the ground.

Carl Hooper scrambled to his feet. He started running toward where the man had fallen. He was still holding his gun in his hand. Dan Olsen, who lived on First street across from the school, came out on his porch, saw him and called, "What's wrong, Carl? What's all the shooting?"

"Come on, Dan," Carl answered. "I think it's all over, but be careful."

He felt a little shaky. He hoped his voice didn't show it. The man with the rifle was lying on his stomach. Carl rolled him over. He stared down into the pale face of Andy Norbert, who a few hours earlier had killed a man in what he



had called self-defense. The front of Norbert's shirt was soaked with blood. He was dead.

Several other men, attracted by the sound of the shots, had joined Carl and Dan Olsen. They stared soberly at the gambler's body. One picked up the rifle and sniffed at the barrel. "I heard a rifle shot and then two gun shots," the man said slowly. "I reckon he got first crack at you, Carl. The self-defense plea, this time, is on the other side."

Carl still felt shaky. This had been a close call. He wondered if Stewart had sent Norbert after him or if this had been Norbert's idea. He was inclined to think that Stewart was back of it and he wondered what Stewart's next move would be.

"Bill," he said to one of the men standing near him, "have Lou Dorsham come out and get Norbert's body. Tell Lou to get in touch with Frank Stewart. Maybe Stewart will want to make arrangements for the funeral."

IT WAS almost six before Carl got home for supper. Edith met him at the door. She had a hurried kiss for him, then ran for the kitchen where something was boiling over. Carl took off his hat and coat. He mopped a hand over his face. He had been perspiring a moment ago but all trace of the perspiration was gone. His face was hot and dry.

"What was that shooting I heard a while ago?" Edith called from the kitchen.

"It must have been some fellow who had had too much to drink and who felt like celebrating," Carl answered. "What's for supper tonight?"

"Stew, the way you like it," said Edith. "And an apple pie. Mary helped me make it."

"I really made it all myself," said Mary, coming in from the kitchen. "It is a very good apple pie."

Carl chuckled. "I'm sure it is."

"Do you want to hear my recitation?" said Mary. "The one I am to give at the school party tomorrow afternoon?"

"Of course I do," Carl nodded. He stared at this grave-eyed, eight-year-old girl, his daughter and Edith's. She was a constant surprise to him. She could be very grown up one minute, childish the next. She was at the top of her class in school. She was ordinarily well-behaved, but could be rowdy, too. In many ways she was a contradiction. She was like Edith, but she was also like him.

In a sing-song voice and standing very stiff and straight, Mary started her recitation. It was a poem called "The Battle of Blenheim." Carl only half listened. He was wondering whether or not to tell Edith of his decision to go ahead on Arne Blake's order to close the Casa Grande.

"More expression, Mary," Edith called from the kitchen. "It is a sarcastic poem. You must bring that out in your voice."

"*Peterkin*," said Mary, "is a funny name for a boy. You are coming tomorrow, daddy. Promise me you will come."

"I will be there with bells on," Carl promised.

"Supper is ready," said Edith. "Come on, you two, while everything is still hot."

Carl walked out to the kitchen. He pulled the curtains across the window before he sat down. Edith noticed this. She frowned, but made no comment.

"My turn to say grace," Mary declared. "Are you both ready? Daddy, close your eyes."

After Mary had been tucked into bed, Carl put on his coat and overcoat and reached for his hat. Edith walked with him to the door. "Will you be late tonight, Carl?" she asked, frowning.

"Pretty late," Carl nodded.

"How is Arne Blake?"

"He came through the operation in fine shape. The doc says he'll be on his feet in a week."

Edith bit her lips. "You won't have



to—that is, you can let the trouble at the Casa Grande go until he is better, can't you?"

Carl nodded. He said, "Of course I can, Edith. After all, I'm just Arne's deputy."

"And you will let it go, Carl."

Carl Hooper forced a smile to his lips. He said, "Look here, Edith. We agreed, long ago, that you were never to worry about me. You've got to keep your bargain."

"It's hard, sometimes," Edith whispered. "Hurry home, Carl. Don't keep me waiting too long."

It hadn't yet started to snow but the wind was colder. Carl took a roundabout way to his office. On the main street, above the Casa Grande, he stopped in a doorway to light his pipe. He didn't like to think of Edith, at home, worrying about him. He didn't like to have to lie to her about what he was going to do. He didn't like to remember his promise to be at Mary's party. A job like this, he told himself, was no job for a married man. The responsibilities of a man for his family seemed to get in the way of what had to be done.

Carl sucked on his pipe. His hands were buried deep in his pockets. He stared toward the Casa Grande. A dozen horses were at the tie-rail. More were at the tie-rail in front of the hotel. There were twice as many men in town as would ordinarily be here on a cold week-

day night such as this. A chance of quick, easy money at Stewart's gambling tables had brought them. Some were here to get even on past losses. As likely as not, there would be several fights before the night was over. Carl bit hard on the stem of his pipe. He had to go through with what he had started. Nothing else was open to him.

He moved on down the street past the saloon. He came to the sheriff's office, unlocked the door and stepped inside. He lit the lamp, opened the damper in the stove, took off his overcoat, hung it up and then moved back to the stove. He had hanked the fire before leaving. The warmth of the stove felt good.

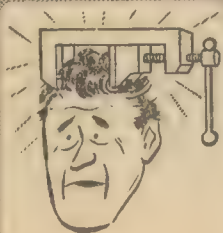
Behind him, the street door opened. Carl glanced around. He caught his breath. He watched Frank Stewart, Harry Price and Rock Keegan move into the office. Stewart was holding a gun. A twisted, humorless smile showed briefly on his lips.

Carl turned to face the three men. He told himself he should have expected something like this, that he should have been ready for it. He scowled at Stewart. "Why the gun?" he asked bluntly.

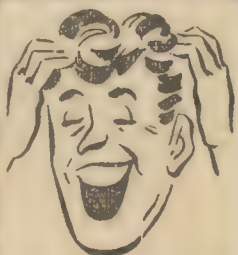
"I might want to use it, deputy," Stewart answered. "Suppose we have a little talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," said Carl Hooper.

"We think there is," said Stewart. "It was Arne Blake who was going to cancel



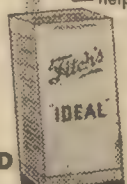
**SCALP  
FEEL TIGHT  
AS A VISE?**



**LET FITCH'S IDEAL  
AND THE JIFFY RUB  
LOOSEN IT UP**



**THEN LOOK AND  
FEEL EXTRA  
GOOD!**



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my license. Arne's flat in bed. He can't do anything about it. Suppose we let things ride for a week."

"How many more men might be killed in that week?" Carl asked. "It's no dice, Stewart. You're closing the Casa Grande, tonight. Widdemeyer, who leased to you, will take it back."

Stewart's eyes narrowed. "I'm not much good at begging, Mr. Deputy," he said slowly, "but maybe your little daughter is. It will only take Harry Price and the Rock a minute to go and get her. Shall I sent them after her? How about it?"

Carl Hooper stiffened. He glanced at Price and at Rock Keegan. Price's face told him nothing but Keegan was grinning, as though something like this appealed to him.

"The Rock's not very gentle," said Frank Stewart. "You had better do some fast thinking, deputy. Mighty fast."

CARL HOOPER stood facing these three men. He was grimly silent. He knew that Stewart meant just what he said. This was no idle threat. Stewart would send his two men after Mary and beyond that one point, Carl couldn't think. Beyond that point his mind wouldn't function.

"Well, shall I send them?" Stewart was asking. "Shall I send them or are you going to play it wise?"

Carl Hooper stood at his desk. He kept his eyes on Stewart but at the same time was aware of the other two men. Against the three he had no chance at all, and he knew it. Against Harry Price and Rock Keegan, his wife and daughter would have no chance. He had to agree to what Stewart was asking, but at the same time he couldn't agree. Men who would use this kind of leverage one time, would use it again. He tried to see some way out but there was no way out. He was trapped by his job, by the responsibilities he couldn't duck.

"All right, Rock," Carl heard Stewart say. "You and Harry go get the girl. Bring her here."

Carl waited. He waited without saying a word until Rock Keegan and Harry Price turned toward the door, then his knees folded and he dropped down, clawing desperately at his gun as he fell. He heard the roar of Stewart's shot. A sharp pain stabbed through his side. He whipped up his gun. He was half behind the desk. Keegan hadn't left, nor had Price. They had whirled around. Their bullets were smashing into the desk, smashing through it. Carl could feel the sweep of cold air across the floor. Someone had opened the street door.

Around the corner of his desk he caught a glimpse of Frank Stewart. He leveled his gun and fired. He fired again and then a third time. A high, shrill scream broke from Stewart's throat.

Carl reached for the edge of the desk. He pulled himself up. He saw Harry Price, now, standing in the open doorway. Keegan was moving that way. Carl fired at Keegan but Keegan didn't stop. He fired once more. Keegan seemed to be diving for the doorway. He fell half way through it, and across Harry Price's body.

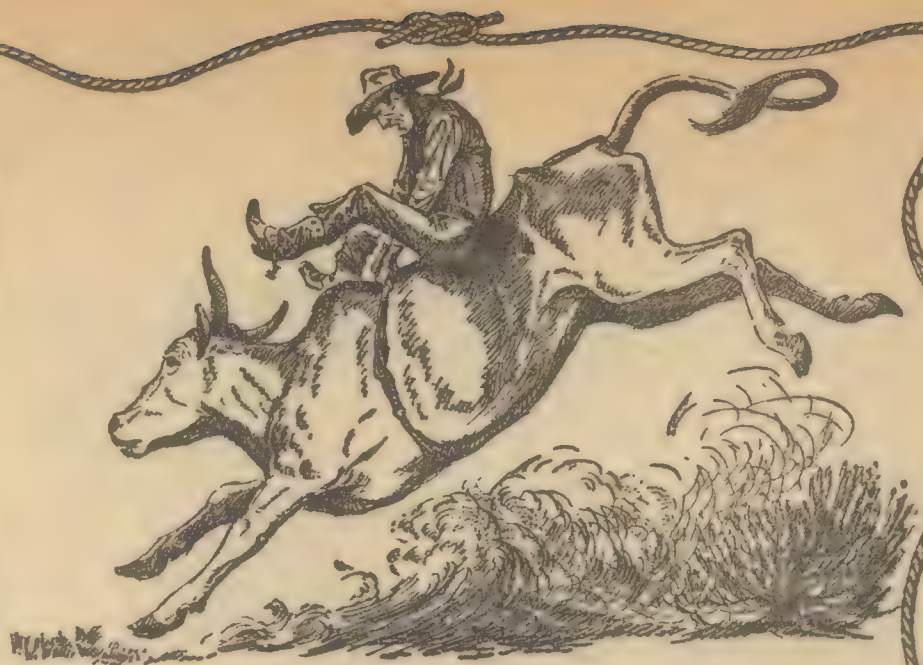
The stabbing pain in Carl's side was clouding his mind. He managed to stand up. He reached Arne's chair and sat down in it and just as he made it to the chair, men from the town started crowding into the room. Carl lowered his gun, then, and tried to find the strength to explain what had happened. . . .

"One of his ribs turned the bullet, Mrs. Hooper," said Dr. Edwards. "A few days in bed and he'll be as well as ever. What's this about some school party he's got to go to tomorrow. He mumbled about it all the time I was working on him."

"It's not important," Edith answered. "Mary has a part in a program. Carl wanted to hear her."

*(Continued on page 130)*





# ***Braymer Tamer***

**By  
S. Omar Barker**

*A lad that rides a Braymer steed,  
Accordin' to my view,  
Has got the rawhide innards  
Of a shore 'nough buckaroo.*

*I claim he's plenty forked,  
But in case he ain't, it's clear  
He will be, boys, he will be—  
By the time he's rode that steer!*





# DEAD MAN'S CHEVRONS

*While Captain Maher galloped to glory, his men rode to the grave. But there was no rating high enough, the captain found — to outrank a dead man's chevrons!*

CAPTAIN Phillip Maher had been watching the battle for over an hour now. It was not a battle, really, but a hopelessly one-sided defense being made by the drivers of the five wagons and the half dozen soldiers from Fort Bisbee against a hundred howling, blood-lusting Cheyenne warriors. The freighters' revolving pistols and the soldiers' breach-loading rifles were taking a heavy toll of the Indians, but the defenders were gradually being whittled down by the sheer weight of numbers.

"One company of mounted men could scatter those red devils like sand in a windstorm, sir." Sergeant-Major Owen Flaherty's voice was tight, husky with suppressed emotion.

Maher nodded, keeping his eyes on the battle not two miles distant from the stockade walls of his fort. His fort. The thought brought a thinness to his lips. Fort Disaster was well named, for it was

not a fort but a trap, and as such it was a living breathing reminder of his own rashness—a mockery to his rank, an end to his career. It was a thin-walled, hollow skeleton of earth and timber in the middle of the parched Montana plains, surrounded by Indian-infested mountains and manned with two companies of raw recruits, eighty to the company.

"Shall I muster them out?" The sergeant's voice was cracked and pleading.

Captain Maher turned from the window in the sentinel tower. He was a young man, tall and stiff-backed, with the cold impassive countenance that officers learn to wear. He looked at the sergeant calmly.

"I'm still in command here, Flaherty. I say when the men ride and when they stay out of saddle. I don't need your suggestions. You have eyes, I presume?"

"Yes, sir."

"You see that hill in the rear of the wagon train?"

"Yes, sir." Sergeant Flaherty's eyes were cold, his face flushed with anger.

"Can you see what's on the other side of that hill, Sergeant?"

By

DAN KIRBY





A lantern flared and he saw  
the bloody, huddled heap  
that once had been Jim  
Fickett....

"No, sir."

Captain Maher glared at him.

"Neither can I, soldier, and that's why I'm not sending half my command out there to pull those wagons out of the fire. Now get out of here."

The sergeant sighed heavily, clicked his heels, saluted and went below. Captain Phillip Maher returned to the window in time to see the Cheyennes sweeping in for the kill. They were among the wagons

now, their war clubs slashing, their piercing cries of triumph carrying even to the walls of the fort. The feeble crack of the soldiers' carbines died.

A sudden flash of color fifty yards from the doomed wagon train caught the edge of Captain Maher's powerful field glasses and he swung them in that direction. In a shallow gulch there he saw a man crouched low, partly concealed by brush that grew around the edge. The man wore

the blue uniform of a cavalry trooper. Somehow, Maher reckoned, the man had made his escape from the wagons while the Cheyennes were turning for their last charge.

Maher watched tensely as the Indians set fire to the wagons and rode about them with reckless abandon, at times edging close to the spot where the soldier lay hidden. But finally they swung off toward the towering, pine-covered hill, and their cries echoed to silence as they disappeared behind it.

Maher turned from the window and climbed down the sentinel tower ladder. He walked slowly across the sun-scorched parade, conscious of the stares of the men who stood grouped in front of their barracks. They wanted to fight, Maher thought. The green fools didn't know about Indian tricks to lure soldiers out of a fort and into ambush. But he knew it better than any living man in the Indian fighting army.

He went into the headquarters building and Flaherty stood up from his desk as he entered.

Maher said, "Wait another half an hour and then send an eight-man detail to the wagons."

"It's over?" the sergeant-major asked heavily.

Maher nodded briefly. "One trooper escaped from the wagons. He's hiding in a gulch, and he probably won't show himself until a detail gets there."

Flaherty left, and Maher went into his office and sat down at his rough pine desk. Outside he could hear snatches of talk from the soldiers, and he knew that they were cursing him for standing by while the Indians destroyed the wagon train. He could hear the yells of the ones volunteering for detail, and could visualize the disappointment of those rejected, for he was a fighting man himself.

Or, he reflected bitterly, he had been at one time.

TWO years ago when he first came to this country as Major Phillip Maher of Civil War fame, he had openly boasted that he could take two hundred well-mounted troops and chase the Indians completely out of Montana—but that was two years ago, and now he knew better. He had seen his mistake in the dead and dying bodies of a company of seasoned troopers. He had heard his mistake broadcasted by the commanding officer in front of the whole regiment at Fort Laramie, and he had known the humiliation of defeat and disgrace by demotion to the rank of captain.

From that holocaust he had learned the folly of rashness and his lesson had kept Fort Disaster intact, with a record of no deaths by Indians during his two-year command. It was not a glorious record nor an inspiring one to the army, but it was to Phillip Maher, even though he knew that his own raw recruits were slyly contemptuous of Careful Captain Maher.

Twenty minutes later Maher heard sounds of activity at the sallyport. He left his office hurriedly and reached the small gate at the rear of the stockade just as the last of the returning detail filed through. Sergeant Flaherty, astride a deep-chested roan, barked gruff orders to the soldiers handling the army field wagon, and the driver swung it across the parade toward the dispensary. That wagon carried the charred remains of the men who had died in the massacre.

A soldier sitting astride a horse behind Flaherty swung to the ground and walked toward Maher. He was a big red-headed man, and there were a corporal's chevrons on the sleeve of his torn tunic. His hat was gone and there was a smear of blood on his leathery forehead. A frown creased Maher's brow as he stared at the trooper, and he could not stop the sinking sensation that invaded his stomach.

The soldier stopped in front of Maher and saluted awkwardly, missing his hat.



His blue eyes were cold. "Corporal Quinn, sir," he said. "B Company at Fort Bisbee."

The nervousness in Maher's stomach turned to a cold lump. Seeing this man standing here, blood-smeared and exhausted, was like reliving a portion of that murderous attack of two years ago. Beside himself, Corporal John Quinn was the lone survivor of the ambush into which Maher had led his company at Wild Rose Pass on that memorable day. Quinn had testified at the War Department hearing after the onslaught. The corporal's testimony had been fair, but it had been disastrous.

"I remember you, Quinn," Maher said. "I didn't know you were at Bisbee."

Quinn kept his eyes on Maher's face. "The men were expecting you out there, Captain," he said. "I kept telling them you'd be there. I kept telling them you were hell for an Indian fight."

The corporal's words were respectful, but his voice was tipped with faint irony. Maher flushed.

"It's the responsibility of Fort Bisbee to see that supplies to this fort are adequately escorted, corporal." Maher's voice was edged with cold anger. "I'll not risk half my command to relieve Fort Bisbee's poor judgment."

"Sir," the corporal said somberly, "it will be my duty to report to General Brant at Fort Bisbee that our wagon train was besieged and wiped out within two miles of your fort, and that though fully aware of the attack you made no effort to relieve us."

The captain's face grew suddenly weary. He said brusquely, "To hell with your report, Corporal, I'll not lead my men again into a possible ambush." He turned his back on the redhead soldier and strode toward his office.

He wanted to work, to drive the old memories out of his mind, but the past was too vividly with him now. He could close

his eyes and see the train of hay wagons loading down in the mountain-encircled meadow. He could hear Lieutenant Roxy's shout of alarm as the band of Sioux warriors filed out of the hills through Wild Rose Pass. There seemed to be a hundred of them, fair game for his eighty well-armed troops. The Sioux came closer, circling the wagons at a respectful distance, but yelling insults and goading taunts at the white men.

It looked like his chance to show General Tenson of Fort Laramie how he'd deal with the red devils if given a free rein. He had detailed a dozen troops to stay with the wagons and given the order to charge the Sioux braves, in a fine show of audacity.

They had chased the Sioux through the Pass and when it looked as though they could corner the braves, a half thousand howling warriors poured out of the hills around them. The rest was a nightmare, a red, screaming hell that ended without a soldier left standing.

It was a week before he fully recovered from his own wounds, a week before he realized the extent of the tragedy. Seventy-eight dead, two wounded, out of his entire company of eighty men. Even the men left to guard the wagons had been killed. He would have been killed himself had not Corporal Quinn dragged him into a ravine and covered him with leaves before the scalp knives had found him. It was nearly as bad as the Fetterman Massacre at Lodge Pole trail some two years before. Worse for him, for at least Fetterman had gone down with his men.

That had been two years ago and he had sworn then that if ever placed in command again he'd not risk the life of a single man serving under him. He had kept that promise. He sent out patrols of twenty men where a less cautious commander would have sent ten. He used unattached scouts for hazardous journeys instead of troopers. He played it safe, and his men

cursed him behind his back for being a coward, for keeping them penned up like sheep when they had signed up to fight Indians. But in time the army would forget about Wild Rose Pass and remember him as the captain who commanded Fort Disaster for two years with out losing a man. That was what he wanted and what he hoped for.

The sergeant-major stepped inside Maher's office. He said quietly, "Jim Pickett is outside, sir. He has requested to see you immediately."

Maher looked up. "Show him in, Flaherty," and almost before he finished speaking a big, long-haired man in greasy buckskins barged through the door. Jim Pickett was a rough-talking, coarse-mannered man, measured by Captain Maher's yardstick. But he was one of the best scouts in Montana and he knew Indians.

**T**HE big scout sprawled out in a chair opposite Maher and took a cigar from the box on the desk. He lighted it, exhaled expansively, then squinted at Maher through a cloud of smoke.

"Captain," he said loudly, "ye're a mighty lucky man. Yore boys out there told me about them Cheyennes wiping out that supply train outside the fort. They were right het up over yore not sending out relief, but they didn't know there was three hundred other redskins hiding behind that hill out there. Saw 'em with my own eyes. Couldn't get through to warn you that those sneaky scalp snatchers were hoping to draw you into an ambush. I don't see how you knowed them red devils was baiting a trap, but I reckon that's why yo're the captain. Takes a purty smart fighter to out-figure them Cheyennes."

Maher felt a sudden warmth flow through him. He had played out his hunch and it had been right. He'd saved his men from another ambush because he'd

been cautious when it would have been so easy to ride hell-bent to rescue. He said, a little shakily, "I thought it might be a trap. Otherwise the Cheyennes would have attacked the wagon train farther back on the trail, so that we here at the fort would not have seen it."

Pickett nodded, rolling the cigar between his lips. "Them Injuns is up to somethin', Captain. I come across the hills south of here and almost ran into about five hundred Sioux warriors coming this way. They're camped down in a hollow right now, not five miles from here. Three-four miles east of them Sioux, the Cheyennes have pitched camp with about four hundred braves. Anytime there's that many Injuns in one place there's trouble coming, and any time them Sioux and Cheyennes get together, it's dam' bad trouble, mister."

He asked uneasily, "What kind of trouble, Pickett?"

The scout crossed his long legs and studied the tip of his moccasins. "I heard it from a Crow Indian," he said slowly. "Them Cheyennes and Sioux have got it in their heads to wipe out Fort Bisbee and get rid of their main trouble. If they can pull it off, it won't take them long to finish off the little forts like this one and Fort Reno and some of the others."

Maher shook his head, "There's about seven hundred soldiers at Bisbee, Pickett. That many troopers fighting behind walls with howitzers and breech-loading rifles could stand off two thousand Indians, even if the attack took them by surprise. I think you're guessing wrong this time."

Pickett shrugged and got to his feet. "Mebbe, mebbe not, Captain. When I try calculatin' what an Injun's up to, I think of all the things he could be figurin' on, pick out the most unlikely, and get ready for him to do just that. Besides, you ain't dealin' with a bunch of wild young bucks this time. I seen White Bull in that Sioux band, and I wouldn't be sur-



prised if Chief Gall warn't in it, too." He reached over, took another cigar out of the box, and stalked outside.

Mahe rose from his chair and followed the scout out onto the grounds. He saw Corporal Quinn lounging against the wall of the enlisted men's barracks and he went towards him. He wanted to be sure that Quinn had heard about the trap the Cheyennes had tried to lure him into. It would make a difference in the Corporal's report once he got back to his headquarters, and Maher needed all the good reports he could get. Wild Rose Pass was still a strong memory among the older officers.

Quinn saluted as Maher walked up. "At ease, Corporal," Maher said gruffly. "You will be interested to know that our scout Jim Pickett reports that there were three hundred Cheyennes waiting to ambush my reinforcements, had I ridden to the relief of your wagon train."

The corporal's eyes widened, then he nodded and smiled grimly. "You're to be congratulated on your luck, Captain." His voice was easy, but Maher detected sarcasm in the words.

Anger swept over the captain, coloring his face. He said bluntly, "Quinn, you saved my life two years ago and you've begrudged it ever since, judging from your actions. Forget that I'm Captain Maher for awhile, and get your grievances off your mind."

Quinn took a deep breath. He said

tightly, "You asked for it, Captain Maher. Sure, you played a hunch today and it turned out right. You played a hunch two years ago and it turned out wrong. That's got nothin' to do with it, Captain. The thing that galls me and all of your men is that you don't think about anybody but Captain Maher. You made a glory ride at Wild Rose Pass. It was show-off stuff to prove what a great Indian fighter you were. You did it against the warning of your experienced non-commissioned officers. You were thinking of yourself then, Captain, not your men. Today it was the same. You didn't know them Cheyennes were out there laying for you. You thought they might be, and you figured that Captain Maher's record couldn't stand another black mark so to hell with the Fort Bisbee supply train. It would have been the same if the Cheyenne ambush hadn't been there. You'd have let a dozen good soldiers die to save your own hide with the War Department. That's what's on my mind, Captain, and that's what all your men think of you. You asked for it—now you know."

Mahe did not reply. He looked at Quinn a long moment, then turned and walked off. He could not trust himself to speak. Quinn's barbs had dug deep and Maher knew the truth in them. It was possible for a commander to protect his men and at the same time protect his own record. But the men came first, and



**Jack Bailey**  
CROWNED A  
**QUEEN**  
FOR A  
**DAY**

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THOUGHT OF HEADACHE  
BUT WHEN SHE FEELS  
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the commander's own record was incidental. That was how it should be, but Maher was not able to deceive himself in the belief that it was that way with him. He was an army man. His life and his career and his vanity prodded him constantly, because other officers who once had been his juniors were now above him. His battle was not with the Indians, but with the army itself.

HE PAUSED out on the parade to watch his lieutenant drill a squad of newly recruited soldiers. Lieutenant Braden was fresh from West Point. He was stuffed to his ears with army regulations and discipline. His drill was perfection. Right now his sole interest lay in making disciplined soldiers out of those recruits.

Maher's eyes switched from the lieutenant to the squad of new men sweating under the broiling sun, awkwardly imitating the lieutenant's smooth movements. He could almost see the disgust in the recruits' faces. They didn't give a damn about drill or army regulations. They had come here to fight the Indians.

Watching them there, it came to Maher that Lieutenant Braden was like himself. Braden figured he was here to make soldiers out of those men, and once he got them whipped into army pattern he would consider his job done. But the men knew better. They knew the job wouldn't be done until they had met and conquered the Indians, and they wanted to get at it. And he was like Braden because he had always consoled himself that he was doing his job so long as his command was intact, closing his eyes to the fact that the whole purpose of the army was to fight the enemy.

He turned back toward his office and stepped inside just as Corporal Quinn came running up. Quinn was pale, his mouth a tight slash in his sweat beaded face. He said, "Captain Maher, Pickett

says there are five hundred Sioux under White Bull camped near here."

Maher turned around. "That's right, Corporal. What about it? Pickett says they'll join the Cheyennes and move on Fort Bisbee. We're in no danger—as yet."

Quinn said tightly, "But what about the garrison at Bisbee, Captain? You asked me today why Bisbee didn't send a stronger guard with the wagon train. I'll tell you why, Captain Maher. Because they didn't have it to spare. Five hundred troopers left Fort Bisbee three days ago to hunt out and destroy White Bull and his warriors. Somehow the Sioux have circled on them. If Fort Bisbee is attacked now it can't hold out a day against those savages."

The scout, Jim Pickett, was on Quinn's heels. He looked worried, "Captain Maher," he said gruffly, "accordin' to Quinn them dam' Injuns have out-generaled the army. The troopers from Bisbee are following squaw tracks while the warriors doubled back. They'll take Fort Bisbee sure as hell, and they'll be waitin' for them five hundred troopers when they turn back empty-handed and worn to a nubbin chasin' Injuns that ain't there. It'll be the damnest massacre to come off yet."

A chill fanned Maher's back, and yet at the same time there came to him a feeling of satisfaction. He wasn't the only officer in the army that made mistakes. Maybe he had led a company of men to their death; that would be forgotten in the bloody massacre of Fort Bisbee. Some of the army bigwigs who had stared down their noses at him after Wild Rose Pass would be under fire themselves. And it wouldn't be one company they'd lost, but damn near the whole Indian-fighting army, for if Bisbee fell all the branch forts would fall also.

He looked at Quinn and then at Jim Pickett. He said stiffly, "What can I do? I've got one hundred and sixty men and there's a thousand Indians out there. Our



only chance is to get a message through to Fort Bisbee. If they know what's coming, maybe they can hold out long enough for their own messenger to get word to the troopers marching after those Sioux."

Pickett's face clouded. "Hell, Captain, you can't get a man out of here. Them Injuns are watchin' every foot of ground between here and Fort Bisbee."

Maher shrugged. He turned inside and called for his sergeant-major. When Flaherty appeared, he said curtly. "We've got to send a message to Fort Bisbee, Flaherty. There isn't one chance in a hundred of a man getting there. Call for a volunteer."

The sergeant-major nodded his head. "Yes, Captain," he said, and with a swift salute he turned and walked out.

Corporal Quinn saluted stiffly. "By your leave, Captain, I'll go myself. It's my company, that's in danger."

Maher shook his head. "You're in no shape for the trip, Corporal." He walked to the door to meet the sergeant-major, who was almost running across the parade. Flaherty's face was flushed and his eyes coldly triumphant as he saluted before Maher. "They all volunteered, Captain. Every man-jack of them."

A queer tingle of pride rippled through Maher. That was his troopers, every one a fighting man. Then the thought struck him that they weren't volunteering for him; that this was their way of getting back at him for the months he'd kept them behind these walls. They were telling him they weren't afraid to fight or die—even if he was.

Jim Pickett said sourly, "Hell, Captain, there ain't a dozen of 'em could find their way to Fort Bisbee. They don't know this country." He squinted at the sun sliding down behind the hills. It'll be dark inside an hour, Captain. I ain't no glory hunter but damned if I hadn't rather go myself than get showed up by a greenhorn trooper."

IT WAS two hours later that Maher heard the commotion outside. It was pitch dark except for shafts of yellow light streaming from the windows of the barracks, and Maher knew that Jim Pickett had left an hour ago, though no one had mentioned it. He slipped on his coat and walked outside.

Sergeant Major Flaherty almost bumped into him in the darkness. Flaherty said heavily, "Pickett's back, Captain—what's left of him. Those murderin' red devils tossed his body over the wall."

Maher felt suddenly sick. He made his way to the group of men knotted together in the darkness near the wall. A lantern flared and he saw the bloody, huddled heap that once had been Jim Pickett. Maher said huskily, "Take care of the body, Flaherty." He made his way gropingly back to his office.

Corporal Quinn came inside behind him. The corporal saluted stiffly. "I am not attached to your command, sir. With or without your permission I'm taking off for Fort Bisbee."

Maher eyed the red-headed soldier evenly. He said, "Do you think you can make it, Quinn?"

The corporal shrugged. "It's a slim chance, sir."

"Then why take that chance, Corporal?"

Quinn looked at Maher steadily. "So long as there is a chance at all, Captain, I'll take it. That's why we're here, isn't it?"

The corporal was right, of course. So long as there was any chance at all, it was a soldier's duty to take it. Maybe he wouldn't make it. Maybe he'd fail as Maher had failed at Wild Rose Pass, and the incident would go down as one of fool-hardy bravado or reckless, ill-considered action. Maybe he'd pull through. Maybe that one chance in a thousand would work for the corporal. There would be no reward at the end of the trail. No medal for

gallantry would be bestowed by the War Department, because Congress had ruled that Indian fighting was not warfare. The army would pass it off as the corporal's duty and it would end there.

But seeing the corporal standing there, Maher felt the old recklessness seep into his own veins. He said curtly, "I guess you're right, Corporal. That's why we're here, and there is a chance you might get through—over the bodies of a hundred and sixty dead soldiers." He rose and walked outside.

He saw Sergeant-Major Flaherty with a burial detail carrying the body of Jim Pickett. He called sharply, "Flaherty, assemble the men before my office." He turned back inside and took his saber from the peg on the wall and strapped a revolving pistol around his waist. The dumb, green recruits had been bawling for action—they wanted to fight the Indians. Well, he'd give them their chance. A tight smile thinned his lips.

He stood out on the porch of his office, facing the men in the darkness. Lanterns winked in the night, revealing an occasional face, strained and white in the flickering yellow light.

He said loudly, "Troopers, there's almost a thousand Indians outside these gates. They're planning to move on Fort Bisbee and wipe it out to the man. We've tried to send a messenger to carry the warning, and you've seen what happened to him. If we can get a messenger through those Indian lines, we may be able to save seven companies of good soldiers. There is one way we may be able to do that."

"Let's have it, Captain. Anything beats sweating it out behind these dam' walls, rose a trooper's voice, harsh with excitement.

Maher felt the excitement burning in himself. He said recklessly, "We'll see how game you are, troopers, the whole lot of you. You'd like to do a little Indian fighting, and now's your chance. If we get

one messenger through those lines, we're going to have to attack those Indians with every able-bodied man in uniform. We're taking one hundred and sixty troopers against a thousand scalp-hungry Indians, and when the battle starts Corporal Quinn here will slip out of this fort and skirt around the battle ground toward Fort Bisbee. There's a good chance the Indians won't spot him during the excitement of our attack—and there's a damn good chance none of us will ever know whether Corporal Quinn got through!"

For a long moment there was silence. Then a grizzled soldier let out a loud shrill whoop. "We're with you, Captain. Every man of us."

There was noise and confusion then as the men raced off for their mounts under the whiplash orders of Sergeant-Major Flaherty. A trooper led a horse up to Maher and he mounted it. He drew his saber and watched the glint of it in the flickering lantern light. Once before, he thought with a trace of his former bitterness, he'd led men such as these to their death, and he had tried for two hard years to make the army forget it. Now he was deliberately doing it again. If none of them got through this night alive, if Corporal Quinn was killed along the trail to Fort Bisbee, it would go down in history as another Maher glory ride, another wanton massacre due to his own recklessness.

But somehow it didn't bother him now. It wasn't his own reputation he was trying to save this night, but the lives of seven hundred soldiers.

The troopers lined up their mounts, faces tense and eager. A snatch of song broke from tight lips and was picked up wildly like a challenge to the darkness outside the fort walls. The bugle sounded.

Maher felt a hand on his arm and looked down to see Corporal Quinn standing there, smiling. He said huskily, "I wish I was ridin' with you, Captain. You were always hell for an Indian fight!"



Where night guns hooted their lawless message, a hunted man found himself—found himself with heart enough to stop a bullet!

# RUN—AND DIE!



By **ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS**

**O**UT in the street the two guns hooted up like two owls suddenly gone crazy in the night.

Inside the saloon, Yancy kept right on pouring the slow trickle of whiskey into the shot glass, oblivious of the hooting

guns and of the fact that they had stopped hooting as quickly as they had started, though not quite oblivious of the way the man had yelled in pain out there. When the cry sounded, he lifted his head like a fire horse at the sound of the gong, then,

recollecting himself, he turned back to the bar and continued pouring whiskey. When the shot glass contained just the amount he wanted, he set the bottle back on top of the bar, noting with satisfaction that not even the explosion of gunfire had caused him to spill a drop.

Behind him, feet pounded on the floor as men ran toward the front door, seeking the cause of the hooting guns out there, seeking also to know what had happened to the man who had cried out in pain, once, and had been silent afterwards. Yancy didn't move. Let 'em run and gawk, he thought. Let 'em look and wonder. Let 'em say to each other, "If Joe had been a little faster on the draw, he'd have got that other feller."

Hell, life didn't work that way! Joe hadn't stopped that chunk of lead, screaming as it hit him, because he'd been a little slow on the draw. Joe had stopped that slug because the pattern of Joe's life was made for dying. The fact that he was a little slower in getting his gun from its holster was a small part of that pattern, a mighty small part. . . .

Dick Yancy's life had a pattern too, that included a woman named Velda and a man named Kennedy, and death, as sure and as sudden and as swift as the death that had struck Joe out there—and just as inescapable.

Lifting his drink, Yancy thought, "Here's to you, Joe." As he downed the whiskey, feet pounded on the sidewalk outside and the batwing doors swung open, the gawking crowd moving aside to admit four men carrying the kid.

The kid was red-headed, the same one he had seen lingering outside when he had entered the saloon, the kid with the sullen, resentful look on his face and the big gun sticking out of the holster at his hip. When a sullen-faced kid with a big gun was seen hanging around outside a saloon, you didn't need to be a prophet to know that very soon either that kid

would find himself a jump ahead of a deputy sheriff—if his draw was fast—or he would find himself being carried feet first into the saloon—if his draw was slow and he was lucky.

In either case, whether the draw was fast or slow, the end was inevitable, though it might be postponed for months or even years if the kid was good at running and dodging.

They laid the kid on the floor. He tried to sit up but slipped back, staring from dazed fearful eyes around the saloon at the faces above him. The sullen look was gone from his face. A fixed expression of pained surprise was stamped on his features as though something had happened that he had not believed could happen. He twisted his head down to stare at the bloody expanse of shirt front high up on his left shoulder, and the expression changed from surprise to blank terror.

Yancy noted, with professional interest, that the bullet had entered too high to have hit the heart, although it was probably still in him and would have to be probed out in soul-wracking agony. He noted, also, that the blood continuously welling on the shirt front indicated that the slug had nicked a blood vessel and that the kid was going to die if he didn't have expert medical attention, pronto, to get that bleeding stopped.

At the thought, a thin film of sweat began to bead Yancy's upper lip. *Hell, they'll send for a doc*, he told himself. *It's not any of my business. And—there's Kennedy to think about!*

THINKING about Kennedy, he turned hastily back to the bar to order another drink. But the bartender had gone to look at the kid. Providentially he had left the bottle on the bar. Yancy helped himself, and then watched the bartender cut the kid's shirt away and stare at the hole revealed there, and



then looked quickly up at one of the faces around him.

"Jake, run and get Doc Tompkins, will ya?" the bartender said. "Make it fast, Jake. This kid's got to have help."

Jake nodded violently and went out of the saloon on the run.

*There! Yancy thought. They've sent for the doc. I knew they would.*

The saloon became a place of tip-toed silence as men tried to do what they could for the kid. The bartender hastily tore up his own white apron, to make a clumsy bandage for the wound. Another man took off his coat and slipped it under the kid's head. Another asked him if he'd like a cigarette and the kid nodded. The bartender went around the bar and got his private bottle and poured the kid a drink.

*They're being real helpful,* Yancy thought. One of the things about men that always amazed him was their astonishing willingness to be helpful when one of their kind was hurt. Probably none of them had ever given this kid a second thought, until he stopped a bullet, but now they were trying to do everything they could for him. He could feel the same impulse in himself, twitching and itching his fingers. Then he remembered that this was what had gotten him into so much trouble, this impulse to be helpful. At first, all he had been trying to do was help Velda.

Her memory came up in his mind, the coquettish flirt of her head, the provocative way she had laughed. Funny how easily he could see the coquette now, when he hadn't been able to see it before. He guessed the drummer from Kansas City had opened his eyes. He wondered about Kennedy, and if that dark, dour man's eyes had opened yet. He poured himself another drink.

*The kid'll be all right,* he kept telling himself. *As soon as this local doc comes, the kid'll be all right. . . .* Near him, two men were talking about the cause of the

trouble that had set the guns hooting outside. "Red, here, had been keeping company with this gal for about a year when Slim tried to cut in on him. That started it."

"And this ends it," the second man said.

It didn't end it, Yancy knew. He thought about the unknown kid named Slim, building up a picture of him in his mind as tall and slender and a little sulken. Red and Slim and a girl! How many men had died because of trouble over a woman! Before guns had been invented they had used bows and bronze-tipped spears, in a pattern that traced clear back to the time when the spear points were made of flint. This red-headed kid on the floor was not the first man to stop a bullet in this pattern for sudden death, not by more numbers than there were in a college mathematics book, nor would Slim be the last to run. The sweat on Yancy's lip came again and a tremor shook his tall body and he turned quickly to the bar and poured himself a shot out of the bottle the bartender had forgotten to remove. This time the whiskey splashed on the cherry-red mahogany bar, red like a woman's lips.

"Bad, ain't it?" a man standing near said to him.

"Huh?" He was startled and he had to recall his mind. "No—yes."

"You look kind of shook up, mister. He a friend of yours?"

"Don't know him from Adam," Yancy answered.

*What the hell was keeping that fellow, Jake?*

Heels clattered on the wooden sidewalk outside. Voices were raised there, then the batwing doors were swung resolutely aside and a frightened girl looked in. She didn't know what to say and this saloon full of men scared her but she knew what to do. Running to the red-headed kid on the floor, she dropped beside him.

"Jerry — Jerry — You didn't get it straight. Slim didn't mean anything to me, not a thing."

"He didn't!" The kid's face lit up at the words and Yancy, watching, wondered again what there was about women that men should find them so important.

The kid seemed pleased; he tried to sit up, but didn't make it.

**Y**ANCY, watching the kid's face, wondered again what was keeping Jake. It was becoming important that Jake get here with Doc Tompkins damned soon, or else the girl cuddling the kid's head in her lap would find herself holding a dead man.

Of course, if Jake was too slow, there was another way. Outside in the saddle bags of the horse tied to the hitching rail was a diploma from a big Eastern medical school—with the name Lester J. Yancy inscribed on it. There was a flat wooden case of surgical instruments, scalpels and probes, and a black bag—all that remained to remind Dr. Lester J. Yancy what he had once been.

Once been—he was as good as he ever was. A year didn't make any difference. It wasn't fear that he had lost his skill that was holding him back, it was Kennedy. Thinking of that man, again he turned to the bar and poured himself a drink. This time more of the whiskey went on to the bar top than into the shot glass.

The whiskey soothed the jangle in his nerves a little, made him forget for a moment the dark shadow of the man named Kennedy. He didn't have to worry about Kennedy. Somewhere along the twisting tortuous trail he had left behind him he had lost the man. Another six months and he would be sure he had lost him forever. Then, in some of these little western towns where a man like him was desperately needed, he could start up again and feel safe.

Safe! That was it. He was safe now and he owed it to himself to stay safe. If he admitted what he was, and helped that kid, there was a chance that Kennedy would hear about it. Certainly the story of how an unknown man had turned out to be a fancy doctor and saved a kid's life would be told far and wide. It might put Kennedy on his trail again. Remembering the depths of violent passion that burned in that dark and bitter man, he knew he didn't dare take a chance on Kennedy. The man had sworn to kill him!

The kid coughed, a hollow sound. Where was Jake?

Feet pounded outside and the batwings were thrust open. Jake stood there panting. "Doc Tompkins left 'bout an hour ago—baby case at a ranch."

The saloon was very still. The red-headed kid looked wonderingly at Jake, trying to grasp the meaning of the words he had just heard.

The girl understood them, and her face paled.

Yancy spoke. "Then call another doctor. This man must have medical attention right away."

Faces turned toward him. "Guess you must be a stranger here," Jake said.

"What does that have to do with it?"

"There ain't no other doctor," Jake said.

"There must be another doctor!" Yancy shouted the words and repeated them. The sweat on his upper lip had spread to his whole face, and it showed as yellowish-tinted drops in the light from the lamps burning in the saloon. "Dammit, the man has to have help!"

"Ain't no help," Jake said.

"Ain't another sawbones within forty miles!" the bartender said.

Whiskey slopped on the bar as Yancy tried to hit the shot glass. "In that case—"

He made up his mind. The need of



the red-headed kid, and the need in him to help, were too great to be ignored. To hell with Kennedy! He had to live with himself, or he was something a damned sight less than a man. He wiped the yellow sweat from his face and straightened his shoulders.

The batwings swung open and Kennedy walked in.

Kennedy was startled. Apparently he had been passing by and had come in without knowing what was taking place inside. His eyes sought the red-headed kid on the floor, then his eyes went wonderingly over the room seeking an explanation for what he saw. He looked straight at Yancy and his gaze went on.

Inside Yancy there was panic. Kennedy had looked at him and hadn't recognized him. He could thank his beard for this lack of recognition, the beard he had carefully grown as a disguise for the moment when Kennedy found him.

Now Kennedy had found him and the disguise had worked. All Yancy had to do was to keep his mouth shut and to slip away in the tip-toe crowd eddying through the saloon. His horse was just outside.

Sweat was on him. On his face, on his hands, on his body, on his soul. Jake looked at him. The bartender looked at him.

"What'd you start to say?" the bartender asked.

Yancy stood very straight. "I was just

going to ask Jake to go out to the bay hitched outside—" He choked for an instant, than his faltering voice found its footing on the pattern in him, and went on—"and get the wooden case marked LJY that's in the right saddle bag. Then look in the left saddle bag and get the black leather bag."

The saloon was silent.

Jake looked wonderingly at Yancy. "You a doc?"

On the floor the red-head coughed again.

"In an emergency, yes," Yancy answered him.

Kennedy's eyes were suddenly on him. He ignored them.

"Get moving!" he said to Jake. As Jake headed for the door, Yancy spoke to the bartender. "Whiskey. Lots of it. No, dammit, don't shake your head at me. It's not for me to drink. It's to sterilize the instruments Jake is getting for me. I want the kid moved to a table and I want men to volunteer to hold him, if it's necessary. I want light, every lamp in this saloon, right over my head. Move, blast you, move! That man has to have help!"

Men moved swiftly to obey him. The kid whimpered, once, as they lifted him to the table top. Yancy stripped off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. "Pour some whiskey in a washbasin so I can wash my hands. Move."

# PAINS

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AS JAKE laid the box on the bar, Kennedy moved to look at the initials on Yancey's instrument box. Then his hot eyes fastened themselves on Yancey's face and never left it.

"This is going to hurt," Yancy said to the kid.

"I kin take it," the answer came.

"You had better wait outside," Yancy said to the girl. Her eyes sought his face and she moved quickly to obey him. As she walked to the door, she looked at him instead of at the kid on the table, and he watched her leave before he turned to the task at hand.

The kid set his jaw muscles. Men moved in to hold his hands and his legs, and his head. They weren't needed—the kid didn't move. All shakiness was gone from Yancy, all the tremors that had spilled the whiskey on the bar, all the sweat from his face, from his body, from his soul. In this moment, even Kennedy was forgotten. With deft sureness, Yancy worked with lance and probe. When he laid the bloody piece of lead on the table, a little sigh went up from the watching faces. When he pulled the last suture into place and the jaw muscles of the kid relaxed, the sigh came again, a sound of wonder and of awe. When he fitted the bandage into place and turned to wash his hands, men crowded around him, trying to slap him on the back, trying to shake his hands, trying to buy him a drink.

He didn't hear a word they said, but when Kennedy spoke he heard well enough.

"I'd like to speak to you for a minute, doc, outside," Kennedy said.

The lights from the saloon threw yellow streaks out into the night. On the board walk, Kennedy was a shadow, speaking.

"I never would have knowed you, doc, if I hadn't seen that kit with your initials on it."

"You didn't ask me out here to tell me that," Yancy said.

"No, I didn't," Kennedy said. "Are you armed?"

"I am not."

Kennedy grunted, a toneless sound that might have meant anything or nothing. "Where is she?" he spoke again.

"She ran away," Yancy answered. "She ran away from me, with a drummer from Kansas City."

"Well!" Kennedy said.

Yancy waited.

"I looked for you, for six months, to kill you," Kennedy said. "I didn't know what life meant until I met my second wife, and I never would have known, if you hadn't taken Velda off my hands. So I want to thank you, doc. You actually did me a hell of a big favor."

Yancy said nothing.

"A hell of a big favor," Kennedy repeated. "Just pick the right one, doc. That's all you got to do. Just pick the right one. So long, doc."

Kennedy turned and walked away. The sound of his feet on the board walk came as Yancy stared after him, thinking what this meant. It meant he could stop running; it meant he could settle down here in one of these little towns and hang up his shingle again and—

Near him a shadow moved. He looked up, startled. It was the girl. "Doctor—"

"Your red-headed friend made it all right," he said. "If no complications set in, he'll be as good as new in a couple of weeks."

"Oh," she said and looked up provocatively.

"Velda!" his voice was hoarse.

She giggled. "My name is Jane," she said.

"Excuse me, Jane." Lord in heaven, didn't the pattern ever change? Kennedy said it did, if you picked the right one, but how was a man to know? "Good night, Jane," he said.



# BADLANDS PROUD

By JOE

ARCHIBALD

"You wear a badge, but that  
don't clear you, mister!"



*If you can trust a man as far as  
boothill, you can trust him in hell!*

**H**YME FENWICK, acting sheriff of Sasco Springs, finished going over some reward dodgers he'd found in Matt Ide's old desk. With the descriptions of certain men clearer in his mind, he got up and walked to the door and looked out over the town. The vista was not one to delight the eye—Sasco Springs was a mining center and

had seen its best days. The main part of it, the stores, the bank, and the residences of the leading citizens, lay at the mouth of the canyon which knifed its way down through the mountains. From the flat the town had struggled part way up the canyon, and the poorer houses were perched one above the other.

Fenwick walked across the main street

and paused at the edge of a planked walk to watch a man ride into Sasco Springs. He rode a jaded black, and led a smaller pack horse, and the deputy waited for him to come up.

"Well," he said, studying the man's lean and stubbled face, "same luck as usual, Ferd?"

"Which seems t' please you mightily," the man said, sliding from a dilapidated saddle. "What you wearin' the top law-man's badge for?"

"Ide busted his leg," Hyme said.

Ferd Crain was a prospector, although he did not own a burro. He had punched cows for several years with the 9 Bar 9 on the other side of the mountains but had seen no future in the work; so he had gone in search of the gold that many other prospectors in those parts had failed to find although they'd been sure it was there. He was a loosely-knit man with signs of bovine stubbornness around his mouth, and the sun had bleached a lot of the deep color out of his brown hair and eyes. At the moment he looked hungry and spiritless.

"I'll find that pay dirt," Ferd Crain said, "if it takes me another twenty years," and he walked stiffly away and toward Hanneford's saloon.

Looking after the man Fenwick thought of Willie Chu, who ran the little grocery store in the poor part of Sasco Springs. Ferd would make his next stop there, he knew, and he wished he could pass a law. Willie Chu had been in town as long as he could remember, and he guessed the kindly old Chinaman was getting close to sixty years of age. Willie's faith in the ultimate honesty of the human equation was endless, and his sympathy was bottomless. Behind his old board counter, on the wall, was a bunch of credit slips covered with Chinese characters, and the deputy guessed that a lot of men Willie had staked were no longer in this vale of tears.

Willie Chu had seemed a mildly frightened man during the last few months, had no doubt been considering a man's allotted three score years and ten and wondering if his soul would be forever lost if his mortal remains never reached the land of his ancestors. Men had tried to reason with Willie Chu for the past five years, and had advised him to harden up his big heart and turn away those fiddle-feet that took advantage of him. But Willie Chu would always say, "I've been hungry, too. It is very bad. They ketchum money some day and they will pay me black."

The people of Sasco Springs knew better than to suggest that they would see to his return to his native land when his time was up. Willie Chu would sacrifice his soul rather than accept charity, and so he went on staking the unfortunate, deserving and undeserving, and let Confucious judge.

Fenwick eyed the strange bronc as he passed the Sasco Springs bank. It was a claybank and had been ridden far, for its head was down and dust and sweat was caking on its hide. The brand on its rump was unfamiliar, but it was not that fact that stirred the deputy's interest. It was the old saddle it bore, a double-rigged Frazier with a silver horn, and its hasty studded with the same bright metal. It bore mute evidence of having been in and out of a saddle-maker's shop countless times and now it was splitting at the seams again. Fenwick felt a vague stirring in his mind when he stepped into Hanneford's.

Ferd Crain was leaning against the bar reviling the fat and oily man behind it, at the same time assuring the barkeep he'd stop by an hour later with some money. The sheriff was about to set one up for the prospector when a husky voice said, "Here, give the bum a drink!" A silver dollar hit the bar, spun, then rolled toward Ferd Crain.



Fenwick centered his glance on the man standing at the end of the bar where the sunlight was thin, and felt a sudden unease. The face under the dusty and battered black hat was etched with many tiny lines, and cracked by a stiff and mirthless grin. It was an old face with the exception of its eyes. Perhaps, Fenwick thought, liquor had made them brighter than they should have been.

Ferd Crain picked up the silver dollar and threw it toward the man. "I don't take nothin' when it's thrown at me as if I was a dog, mister." The heavy coin hit the stranger in the shoulder and wiped the grin from his face, and Ferd Crain drew his Colt just as the man's right hand fell out of sight behind the counter. He yelled, "Don't draw, friend!"

The stranger to Sasco Springs stiffened, his right hand coming into view again. It moved slowly, as if the man had weighed his chances. Ferd Crain, beads of sweat shining on his face, cursed chokingly and stumbled out of Hanneford's.

"Put the gun back, Sheriff," the dry voice said, and the smile came back to the stranger's face. "That hombre looks like he'll die of thirst anyway. Would you care for a drink, friend?"

Fenwick shook his head. "I'm not in the mood, but much obliged all the same. You'd think that after as many years as you've lived, you'd be sick of gun trouble."

"A man's as old as he feels, Sheriff. Saw you lookin' at my bronc 'fore you come in, an' it ain't much of a cayuse t' draw anybody's attention. Maybe it was the saddle—bought it off a man up by Battle Pass. My name is Tuck Smith an' I'm passin' through. Come this way once a long time ago. Town ain't changed a bit."

"You're welcome here as long as you don't stir up trouble, Smith," the deputy said, and then he noticed the man's

slim and capable hands. Age hadn't gnarled their long fingers nor had hard work stiffened them. It was apparent to Fenwick that they had been carefully preserved for a certain kind of work. "All right, Smith, keep out of trouble."

THE sheriff went out of the saloon and walked up the incline to the shabby section of the town and finally turned into Willie Chu's little store. Ferd Crain was there checking on the groceries the Chinaman was putting up for him. Willie grinned widely at the deputy and bid him a cheery good afternoon.

"Are you crazy, Willie?" Fenwick snapped. "How long are you goin' to stake this hombre?"

"Some dlay he ketchum gold. He play me back, Hyme."

"What business is this of yours?" Crain threw at the lawman. "I've run up a bill here, but the first stuff I find will go to Willie. I've given him my word."

"Too bad I didn't let the old spook finish you off, Ferd," Fenwick said sourly. "You ain't any use to any man. How do you think Willie buys his supplies if none of you bums pays him?"

"I don't like that name, Fenwick," Crain yelled, and drove his fist at the lawman. It hit Fenwick in the shoulder and rocked him back on his heels for a moment. Then he came at Crain as if he had springs attached to his boots and floored the prospector with a terrific punch to the side of the head. Willie Chu shook his head solicitously. "Very blad, Sheriff. Ferd is not blad man."

The deputy helped Ferd up and said he hated to have this happen. Crain's anger was out of him, and he was bitter within as he picked up the bundle of groceries. He quickly let them drop to the counter again and stared at Fenwick. "I'll get that money for Willie Chu, Hyme, I swear it. Knowin' what it means—"

"Don't go wild, Ferd," the sheriff said. "Maybe you'll have good luck next trip." He walked out of the little store concerned with the look he'd seen in Crain's eyes, and suddenly stopped in his tracks. Tuck Smith was leaning against a post that held up one end of Willie Chu's sagging porch, and now that the light of day was fully upon him he looked more unprepossessing than ever. Smith tossed the stub of a cigarette into the dirt and ground it with a bootheel. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Whiter than mos' men, Sheriff, even if his skin is yeller. I've heard about Chu beyond the mountains. Know a couple of hombres he staked. Chinamen have t' go back home when they die, I've heard. It's an old custom."

"Right," Fenwick said, and watched Ferd Crain pile groceries onto the packhorse. "Willie Chu won't ever make it. Owes the bank five hundred. He'll be lucky to have a roof over him when he dies."

Tuck Smith watched Crain go back into the store for another load, then abruptly walked down the hill toward the main street of Sasco Springs. Hyme Fenwick was a young man, and his mind could not go further back than about twenty years. But his mind held things he had heard. A small chill assailed him when he saw Smith pause near a little cemetery. It was a tangle of weeds and vines, and old markers there were nearly choked out. The stranger went into the burial ground and seemed to know just where one of the slabs was. Tuck Smith stood looking down at it, his head bent, and his fingers stroking his chin. Then he turned quickly and got out of the place, and his step was hurried as he continued on down into town.

Fenwick went back to the main street, got his horse at the stable, and rode two miles out of town to a white clapboard house set back from the road and almost

hidden from view by three old locust trees. Matt Ide lived there. The deputy stepped inside and Mrs. Ide looked up from her dusting and grinned at him. "Go on into the bedroom, Hyme. He's in worse temper than usual t'day."

Fenwick went in. Matt Ide was propped up in bed, his leg in splints and resting on two big pillows. He was a man crowding seventy years, and his hair was snow-white. The bed creaked protestingly when he shifted his heavy shoulders and banged the dottle out of his pipe into a tin plate resting on the table. "I'll go plumb outa my mind if I don't knit soon, Hyme. Any trouble?"

"Not exactly. But somethin' puzzles me. Man is in town, Matt, ridin' an old claybank. The man is nearly as old as you. Got a saddle that's all studded with silver—must've cost a thousand when it was new."

Ide forgot his helplessness and tried to get up. He grimaced with pain and let himself fall back. "Describe him, Hyme!" he said.

Fenwick did so. Ide's eyes widened as he listened. Suddenly he interrupted the deputy. "Maybe it's him, Hyme, but then again it might not be. If I could set eyes on the hombre, I'd soon—bought the saddle, he said? Maybe! Remember me tellin' you about Roy Sunbaugh?"

"Gunman," Fenwick said, and nodded. "You carry a healed bullet-hole he put in you, Matt."

"A hellion if there was ever one, Hyme. One of the fastest hombres with a gun I ever saw. How he ever escaped a rope I never will know," Ide said. "Plumb forgot the jigger until nearly a year ago when that story come out in the *Sentinel*, just after the holdup of the stage between there an' Ash Fork. It said the man had silver at his temples and that his voice was old. But the part that made me wonder was the empty canvas sack that was found on the porch of the Ash Fork law office



the next morning. In it was an old reward dodger bearing the names of Roy Sunbaugh and Frank Siker and it was yellow and brittle with age."

"Siker is buried in the cemetery up the canyon, Matt," Fenwick said. "Tuck Smith visited the—"

"It was over twenty-five years ago they had the gunfight in Sasco Springs. Only a saloon and a few other buildings here then," Ide went on. "They fell out for some reason—maybe they had to know who was the better man with a six-gun. Sunbaugh was the one rode away. Well, he's back after all these years and he's the same exhibitionist, Hyme. He's the kind of hombre that does a mighty slick job of robbing, or killing, and has to be given credit for it. Sunbaugh was always like that. He did his shooting in front of an audience. He was a vain devil and proud of his talents. Tuck Smith is Sunbaugh and you go and get him, Hyme. There's a price on his head."

"After all these years," Fenwick marveled.

"Right. Maybe Sunbaugh turned honest for a long time and then he felt the urge to see if he was past his prime," Ide said. "He had to know if he could still keep his hand in. Huh, I bet he doesn't remember me, or figures I've either gone from Sasco Springs or have long since passed away. I'd give a thousand dollars to have both legs good under me. Waste

no more time here, Hyme. Go and get him."

WHEN he left Ide's the deputy was certain it was too late, and not too surprised or dismayed when the claybank was no longer at the tie-rack. The barkeep in Hanneford's said that Smith had ridden out of town nearly a half hour ago and had stocked up at Willie Chu's. "Don't guess he figures t' be near a town for quite some time, Hyme," he said. "I feel easier now he's gone."

Fenwick rode out of Sasco Springs fifteen minutes later guessing that Smith would take the little-traveled way to the Gemini Hills. At dusk he followed a dim trail that straggled over the gaunt ribs of a volcanic upheaval and up into a juniper forest. He stopped his horse where the junipers grew larger and taller and were mixed with white-needed pinon and yellow pine, and carefully surveyed the topography spread out below him. A gust of wind brought rain smell that blended with the sweet acrid odor of the pines, and he looked toward the western skyline and could see only a trace of the coloring of the lowered sun. He rode through the timber and down a long slope to a wide arroyo and here the trail forked and he sat still in the saddle for several minutes before making up his mind.

Fenwick well knew the country within

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a fifteen-mile radius of Sasco Springs, so he took the left fork that strung toward Medota, a cattle and mining town half as big again as his own community. Rain spattered against his face as he rode along the edge of a low-hanging butte, ever alert for the sign of a campfire. Tuck Smith or Roy Sunbaugh or whoever the man was, had no doubt forgotten a man named Matt Ide, and he would have no way of anticipating the knowledge the Sasco Springs deputy carried inside his head; so he should not be too wary of pursuit.

Nearly an hour later the deputy, with the rain lashing at him now, looked down on the watery glow of the Medota street lamps from a timbered ridge and wondered if a man of Sunbaugh's advanced years would not desire warmth and shelter on such a night. He moved out of the shelter of the pine branches, lowered his head to the driving rain, and rode down toward the town. The bronc's hoofs were beating hollow sounds out of a corduroy bridge spanning a shallow watercourse when Fenwick heard the thump of gunfire. Two shots, then half a dozen more that set up a hue and cry in the town. He was fifty yards from the outskirts and riding at a fast clip when the shape of a horse and rider loomed up in the curtain of rain, and he had just time in which to wheel his horse to the side of the road before he heard the sharp crack of a rifle and felt the stunning blow against the side of his head. He fell from the saddle, landed heavily, and lost his senses for the next few moments.

Hyme Fenwick crawled slowly out of the rain-soaked, matted growth at the edge of the narrow road and hauled himself to his feet, his fingers groping to determine the extent of his hurt. Then he heard shouts and angry voices and there were movements all around him. Rough hands took hold of him and shook him up. Somebody yelled, "Get a rope!" A lighted lantern, a hot smoky globe sput-

tering in the downpour, was thrust close to his face.

"Wears a badge," a man said. "That don't clear you, mister."

Fenwick said in a hurry, "A rider nearly crashed into me. That bullet that grazed me never came from his gun. What is the ruckus?" A bulky man stepped in close and he suddenly said, "Fenwick!"

"Thanks for the welcome t' Medota, Gustine," Fenwick said to the lawman.

"Assayer's office held up," Gustine said and called his men off. "Ed Granniss was just putting some stuff away in his safe when the jigger walked in. Ed's shot up pretty bad, Hyme. The spook got away with a sack of gold worth three to four thousand dollars."

"What did he look like?" the deputy asked.

"Nobody got a real good look at the hombre," Gustine said angrily. "The rain was like a big gray blanket over this town an' every man an' horse looked alike passin' through it. The skunk had a good head start when we turned our guns loose."

Fenwick sighed ruefully and shook his head to free it of rain and pain. "I was trailin' a badman, Gustine, but guess I was a little too far behind him. Sorry to have wandered into your jurisdiction."

"I'm not a selfish man, Fenwick," the sheriff grinned. "Better come into town an' let the sawbones look at your wound. Your face is mighty nasty."

Fenwick got on his bronc and rode into Medota. He went into a big saloon and dancehall with Gustine and had a stiff drink until the doctor could get there. The professional man arrived with his black bag and ran a thumb across the burn alongside the lawman's head and grunted with satisfaction. "Not close enough t' crack your skull, mister. You feel sick-like?"

"No," Fenwick said.



Afterward he went over to the assayer's office with Gustine. There was a six-gun on the counter and blood on the floor behind it. The safe had been slammed shut. Fenwick looked around but found nothing of importance. "A clear getaway," Gustine growled. "Who was you chasin', Hyme?"

"Don't rightfully know," the deputy said. "Tuck Smith, Roy Sunbaugh or—"

Gustine snorted. "Wait a minute, Fenwick. Who are you guyin'? Sunbaugh? That gunman lived way back durin'—"

"Men have lived t' be a hundred, Gustine," Fenwick said. "Well, I answered your question the best I could. No need of stayin' here."

They were back in the saloon only about ten minutes when the doctor walked in and called for a stiff drink. He gulped it and banged the glass down, then turned toward Gustine. "Ed Granniss died about three minutes ago."

Hyme Fenwick took a seat at a table near the arched entrance to the dance-floor and considered. He took his mind back to Willie Chu's and heard Ferd Crain vow once more that he'd get the stuff to pay off his grocery bill, and he remembered well the look that had been in Ferd's eyes. Ferd knew then that even Willie Chu might not go on staking him forever and then he'd never realize a dream he'd always had. Gold hunting is almost as much of a disease as consumption or smallpox, and is difficult to cure. There wasn't another store anywhere around where Ferd Crain could get credit.

The deputy from Sasco Springs waited in Medota until the rain stopped and then got his horse and rode back to his own town, weighing some men against others. He thought, *You can't always suspect a fox after you've found slaughter in your chicken coop. I have known men to set a trap for that kind of beast only to find that a common ordinary dog was the guilty party.*

FENWICK slept late on the next morning. He walked into Willie Chu's little grocery store and found the Oriental huddled in a corner behind his counter like a little Buddha. Willie's face was practically inscrutable and if there was any expression there it was one of sadness. He forced a smile when he got up. The deputy said, "Willie, how long do you think Ferd's last batch of supplies will last?"

"Mlaybe six weeks, two months, Shellif," Willie said.

"You trust him. You think if he ketchum gold he will square his account with you?" Fenwick asked.

"I tlust him, yes," Willie Chu said to him.

Fenwick pointed to the stack of unpaid tabs that was affixed to the wall. "You trusted all of them, too, didn't you, Willie?"

The Chinaman nodded and smiled wally. "I have heard your pleacher say a mlan if clasts his bleed upon the waters, Mr. Flenwick, it will come back to him two fload."

The deputy turned and walked out, marveling at a man who would risk everlasting torment of soul for his trust in his brothers. Now he would wait for Ferd Crain. Walking into Hanneford's a few minutes later he picked up an old newspaper and scanned the items on the front page. The rains that had fallen a week ago and the night before had caused washouts throughout the county, particularly over by Battle Pass Creek. The stage road between Medota and Sasco Springs was impassable at that point. The stage came in from Medota while Fenwick was having his drink and three passengers came into Hanneford's and immediately started telling of the killing in the town they had left earlier in the day.

The barkeep said, "Looks like our old badman, Hyme. He sure did work fast after he left here."

"Seems so," the deputy said, and went out to the street.

Six weeks later, Hyme Fenwick got a week's supply of trail grub at Willie's and rode out of Sasco Springs, the idea that Ferd Crain would not return to town nagging his mind. A man like Ferd was not one to labor over a cradle and sluice-box if the bright dust was already in his hands.

He was in the saddle the better part of three days before he dropped down off a saw-toothed ridge near Battle Pass and saw the man at the foot of a long boulder-strewn slope. He immediately recognized Ferd Crain and felt a strange disappointment. He rode down easily, cut through a screen of pine, and stopped within twenty yards of the old sluice-box. Crain, his lean face covered by a black growth of hair, suddenly stood up and stared at him. Crain grinned when Fenwick got off his bronc and walked up to him.

"What brings you out this way, Hyme?" the prospector asked. "Glad you come. Take a look at the stuff in this pan."

Fenwick did so and he swore with amazement. "Bright gold," he said.

"I give up on this claim once, Hyme," Crain said excitedly. "Couple of weeks ago after I'd found no pay dirt over by Benson's Prong I decided to make one more try. A freighter dropped off his wagon to talk an' told me about the wash-outs the rains had made. Well, I patched up the sluice an' fixed it up with more riffles an' started work. Fenwick, I'm certain I've already got close to fifteen hun'ed dollars in dust an' small nuggets."

"Congratulations, Ferd," the deputy said, and wondered now how long his search for Roy Sunbaugh would last. He looked up to where the stream tumbled down through a great crack in a high wall, bringing Ferd's gold to him. "I guess Willie Chu will be mighty pleased, Ferd."

Ferd Crain stooped over and picked up his shovel. "Reckon so, Hyme. It'll take a lot of work before I show much of a profit. No tellin' how soon this diggins will peter out. The freighter told me about a killin' in Medota, Hyme. They catch the badman?"

"Not yet, Ferd," Fenwick said, and wondered at the unease that he felt in his mind.

"Say, Hyme," Crain said, stopping work again. "I'm nearly plumb out of supplies an' if you happen to have some bacon or flour in your bags, I'd—you see I figure to work this place up to the last minute before my luck runs out."

Fenwick said, "I got some stuff I'll leave with you, Ferd. I can be in Sasco Springs by tomorrer night. You haven't seen anythin' of Tuck Smith?"

"I catch one sight of that spook an' I shoot," Ferd Crain said.

"Guess he's a long way from here, Ferd. I'll drop what grub I can spare over by the lean-to."

Crain thanked the lawman.

"I want to be there when you pay Willie Chu," Fenwick grinned. "It'll be a sight to see."

Ferd Crain opined that it sure would, and went back to his work. Fenwick turned in his saddle when he was a quarter of a mile away and looked back. The prospector was standing still and seemed to be watching him. Riding on, Fenwick wondered if he had everything straight in his mind and tried to understand a man like Roy Sunbaugh who had added another killing to his list of crimes. There weren't many years left to the man, everything considered, and one would think he'd be trying to make amends before he met his Maker.

When the deputy arrived in Sasco Springs he kept Ferd Crain's luck to himself and decided Willie Chu deserved a big surprise. He went over to Holcomb's job printing office and had a reward dodg-



er set up. It said that Matt Ide wanted a man named Tuck Smith alias Roy Sunbaugh dead or alive. Ten days later, these had been spread around the county, and Hyme Fenwick sat in Ide's office, a deep suspicion taking root inside him. Ferd Crain should have returned before now for he'd only left the man enough supplies for a day or two. He waited two more days and then he saddled up one night and rode toward Battle Pass and reached Crain's diggings at dusk of the next day.

Fenwick found that Crain had abandoned the lean-to, and now his suspicions were confirmed and he cursed Ferd Crain's black heart. He had apparently panned out around two thousand dollars worth of the bright stuff, and after he had subtracted what he owed Willie Chu had concluded that he would not realize enough fruit of his labors if he paid his honest debts. The gold deposit up there had started to dwindle and so Crain had abandoned it.

"Bread upon the waters," the deputy said, and laughed dryly. "The worst badman of all is the one you believe to be straight." He would never tell Willie Chu about this, for the Chinaman had unbounded faith in men. He lifted his head quickly when he heard the slide of loose rock somewhere off to the right. A horse blew air through its nostrils and Fenwick's bronc neighed and stamped rest-

lessly. The lawman jumped to his feet and drew his gun, moving cautiously out of the lean-to and glancing quickly around. Over across the watercourse, half way up the rocky slope the pinons moved, and then a horse appeared, its saddle empty.

**F**ENWICK'S lower jaw dropped. The bronc was Tuck Smith's claybank. It wickered mournfully, wheeled and went back into the pinons, and the deputy quickly got onto his own horse and splashed across the brawling stream. The claybank led him across the rugged country for several miles, and darkness had set in when it came to a narrow canyon. There it stopped and lowered its head, and getting out of his saddle Fenwick saw a hand reach up and touch the claybank's nose. He heard a cough that had an ugly liquid sound as he walked slowly forward, his six-gun ready in his hand.

The claybank lifted its head as if it had a heavy weight fastened to its neck, and Fenwick stopped short. He saw now that the horse was helping a man get himself off the ground, a man whose hat was off and whose hair was splotched silvery-white at his temples. It was the man who called himself Tuck Smith. A hoarse voice said, "Come here, friend. Hurry."

Fenwick moved in quickly and kept his gun alerted. The badman stumbled toward

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an outcropping of rock and bracing himself against it, turned and looked at the lawman. "No need for the iron, mister. Threw mine away after I emptied it."

"Smith!" Hyme Fenwick said.

"Good a name as any, friend. Say, your voice sounds—"

"Met you in Sasco Springs, Smith," the deputy said, and knew now that the outlaw had been badly wounded. "I'm the deputy there. You killed a man in Medota. Who did you shoot this time?"

The old badman laughed, reached inside his shirt, brought something out, and tossed it at Fenwick. It hit the deputy in the chest and then fell to the ground at his feet. "Ferd Crain's gold, friend," Smith forced out, and coughed again. He dug his fingers into his chest and shook his head violently as if trying to clear something out of his eyes. "Not much time, mister. Crain's—gold?" The outlaw conjured up a laugh that sent a cold wave the length of Fenwick's spine.

The deputy picked up the sack of bright stuff and hefted it in his hand.

"Had t' see the Chinaman was paid," Smith said, his voice getting weaker. The deputy stepped in close so he could hear. "Crain didn't find gold, Willie Chu would never get back t' his people. I got the gold for Crain, friend—from that assayer's office. Long ago I got staked by that Chinaman—long ago. Watched Ferd Crain, followed him all the time when he started workin' that old claim—" Tuck Smith went into a paroxysm of coughing and he shouldered against the rock to keep from falling.

"Easy," Fenwick said. "Easy, Tuck."

"Huh? I don't go until I'm blasted good and ready, mister," the badman said, and drew himself up slowly to his full height and planted his feet wide apart. "Willie Chu wouldn't take gold from such as me. Not from a badman, Sheriff. He'd be sure it wasn't come by honest. I took that stuff and put it where it'd wash down

to Crain's sluice where the riffles'd catch it. I wa'n't never far away, an' then when Ferd Crain gave up an' rode out, I saw he wa'n't goin' in the direction of Sasco Springs. I caught up with him early this afternoon an' give it t' him straight. All about the gold—made a mistake, Sheriff. Crain had a hideout gun. Got me before I drew but I emptied my gun into him 'fore I hit the ground. Got back just this far—about three miles, I figure—but knew I'd never make Sasco Springs."

Hyme Fenwick shook his head in disbelief, yet he knew he was hearing truth. The badman slumped suddenly and he knelt beside him and lifted his head.

"Man should pay his bones' debts, Sheriff," Tuck Smith whispered. "Listen—you take the dust t' Willie Chu. You tell him Ferd Crain he ketchum that money at last. But a polecat named Roy Sunbaugh held Ferd up an' then killed him, an' you just happened along in time t'—you got that, Sheriff?"

Fenwick did not say anything for a long moment, and the badman clutched at his sleeve. "You hear, Sheriff?"

"Yes," the lawman said, and wondered how he was ever going to correctly judge men again.

"Don't matter what folks'll think, Sheriff," Sunbaugh whispered, and Fenwick had to lay his head against the badman's mouth to catch the words. "Somebody knows why I did it. He knows Willie Chu's torment, an' I figure no matter if we're white or black or yellor, He looks after—"

For a long time Hyme Fenwick stared down at the badman when he realized he was dead. The claybank sensed what had happened and it wickered nervously and ran into the canyon. It came back when Fenwick was piling rocks on the upper part of Sunbaugh's body and stood still several yards away, its head down.

"I hope you'll find rest, Sunbaugh,"

*(Continued on page 126)*



# CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 105)

**T**HINK you know a good bit about the West, eh, *amigo*? Then prepare to step up and defend your position. Below are listed twenty questions, dealing with cowboys and the cattle country in general. See how many of them you can call the turn on. A score of eighteen or more answered correctly definitely puts you in the old-timer bracket, so far as range-savvy is concerned. Answer sixteen or seventeen right, and you're still good. But draw a bead on fewer than fifteen, and you're easing into the tenderfoot class. Good luck!

1. True or false? According to Western slang terminology, an "iron tender" is a person with whom cowpunchers check their guns when entering certain saloons.

2. What is the meaning of the Mexican cowpuncher term, "*jaca*?"

3. A "shotgun messenger" used to be: A man employed to deliver shotguns? A man employed to guard a stage-coach?

4. What is the meaning of the rangeland slang term, "Mexican iron"?

5. If the ranch boss sent you out to fetch a "muley," you should return with: A mule? A stubborn cowpuncher? The ranch cook? A hornless cow?

6. If a cowpuncher told you he had just "mustard some cows," what would you think he meant?

7. According to the cowpuncher's way of thinking, the term "ringey" means: Happy? Angry? Full of fun?

8. If a Western acquaintance of yours told you the location of his "favorite roadhouse," you should: Report the matter to the sheriff? Offer to drop out and look the place over with him? Ask him how the food was?

9. True or false? "Rusties" are wild cattle.

10. True or false? A "rowel" is the wheel of a spur.

11. True or false? A "set brand" is a

brand which has been made with a running iron.

12. The term "seven-under-bit" indicates: A type of poker hand? A type of brand? A type of earmark?

13. "Skull cracker" is a cowpuncher term for: An Indian tomahawk? A stagecoach? A bucking horse that attempts to dislodge its rider by rearing backwards?

14. True or false? In Western ranch houses, the term "skid grease" is sometimes applied to butter.

15. If the ranch boss sent you out to bring in a "soft horse," you should return with: A horse that is gentle enough to be ridden by women? A horse which is in poor physical shape and tends to tire easily?

16. True or false? In the language of the rangeland, a "sod-buster" is a cowpuncher who has been thrown extra hard from a horse.

17. If a man is said to be "straight as a wagon tongue," he is considered to be: Crooked? On the level?

18. True or false? A "stomach pump" is a type of bit.

19. True or false? The term "swallow-forking" means to jump a horse while it is running.

20. What is the meaning of the cowpuncher slang term "to tail out"?

# FAST MAN-SLOW

*Most men are one part yellow, the other part  
fight. Slim measured up to just half a man—  
but all hellion!*

ELEVEN times now the man on the jutting mesa rim had watched dawn breathe its rose and jonquil light through the pearling mists that filled the pass to his home valley. Not more than ten hours by horse, not fifteen miles as the eagle flies, but as far from him as the most distant star. He was trapped here, three hundred feet above an arid desert, and not but once a year did the cattlemen come this side the range for gather.

He thought of the girl and the times he had sat in the dusk above the town and watched Dulcie Shimer's shadow pass against the yellow fall of lamplight, and momentary gentleness dimmed the hard-drawn hunger fires of his eyes.

He had water aplenty, and still some tobacco and his knife and spy glass, the luxuries Creigh Gorman had left him to prolong his agony and make his wait more crazing. But not even a human toothpick could blister all day and freeze all night and live without food much longer.

The spy glass was a token of his racing passion. The water had been there, a crumbling reservoir built on top this natural fortress by Indians dead and forgotten a thousand years ago. The tobacco he'd won at the big Territory Race Carnival, six plugs for his last thirteen silver dollars—a bargain price considering that Dulcie Shimer had given him the date,

even if she did it to spite Creigh Gorman and some others of the chesty bunch.

Or maybe that was an injustice. She was true blue and on the level and there had always been a special gentleness in her pert smile when it was meant particularly for him. She owned the Eats in town, and the lord Harry knew she had tried hard to put some fat on his spare bones, and he guessed she liked him from the way she raised hell about his shiftless way of existence. But he wasn't fool enough to think she was soft on him as she might be on a fuller piece of manhood—it made him squirm, but a man couldn't shut out the fact that if she liked him anything extra, it was with a woman's protective instinct for the underdog.

He had been preoccupied trying to puzzle that out on the way home through Dover's Cut when Creigh Gorman and Buzz Bolton and Gaff Raansell jumped him. The jump was partly over the girl, but also because Creigh had misunderstood Slim Pendenton's footloose life and love of poker and told him too much about border trading before realizing Slim might be shiftless but was no long rider. This had been capped by what Creigh claimed as a double cross when Slim came in by a mile-long lead in the big Territory Race in spite of Creigh's warning to lose, and despite Creigh's stealing the shortcut through a rough stand of cats-claw.



# GRAVE

By  
**THOMAS  
CALVERT**



"I made no deal," Slim protested with an out-muscled man's tight grimness as they took him out to the mesa.

"I sent ya word—that's deal enough for me," Creigh rasped with hot contempt. "Any hombre you could fold three ways for a tortilla and stuff in yore hip pocket, should know when he's well off!" he sneered.

Slim Pendenton writhed inwardly, just as he had writhed at every grin and taunt and jeer clean down the years. Nature



He snatched up a stone and hurled it, staggering the bird.

had fashioned him practically all mouth and ears and legs and hands, stringing this together on a gangling frame that not even Dulcie Shimer's cooking could raise over one hundred and three pounds. Even as a shaver, his looks had been too ludicrous to think seriously on, and out of sheer self-protection he had adopted the armor of an easy going, fiddlefooted, game-mad galoot who aimed to be no trouble nor rivalry to anyone.

But he was a born horseman and one of the best wild horse hunters, trainers and riders north of the border when so minded; men had ridden five hundred miles to get his advice on horseflesh or to buy one of his specially trained ponies. That was the point that really got Dulcie's fire up. "Darn yore skimpy hide!" she'd raged a hundred times. "You could amount to something big around here instead of cutting yoreself down to peanut size just gambling and riding races for a living!"

Maybe she didn't know how deep that cut him. He would stiffen and come back hotly, "Jist recollect racing's one place the boys don't get the grin on me! That is one place my skimpy hide counts double."

"Aw, Slim!" she'd switch her tone with a woman's way, and do her best to worry a button loose. "Nobody thinks twice on yore looks after they know you! You'd win those races anyway, even if you weighed two hundred, on account of picking and training the hossflesh—and you know it!"

**W**ELL, he did know it. But within ten minutes, there was always somebody around to grin and haze him about his half-starved, desert-gaunted looks, and his inward tentacles of determination to settle down were knocked into a cocked hat. Stick with the thing where the joke had a double edge that he could turn on his tormentors when they

got too mean. As long as he could out-ride any hombre in that country, that was something in favor of his skimpiness, and in a tight corner, he could taunt his hazers with that fact in a spot where they were touchy too. But that was all front. Inside, he hated his toothpick lankiness, and couldn't even look in the mirror without writhing. His slimness had never done him one good turn, and now it had gotten him marooned like this. Creigh Gorman would have built a fight with any man of decent size for the brutal satisfaction and the sheer glory in it. But where was the glory of beating or shooting up a starved rabbit of a man like Slim?

"No sir, the sympathy would all go to you," Creigh growled maliciously at the bottom of Chimney Top. "You might even lash onto Dulcie was I to beat you bad enough! This is better, and you'll have some time to think on things. And it will all look natural, like you were poking around, fiddlefooted, the way you do, and jist got trapped."

He broke off, his tough, scarred face filling with devilish mayhem. "It's kinda Dulcie's idee in a way . . . she said there were more peaceable ways of settling things than guns and fists!"

He chuckled and looked up at the sheer three hundred feet Chimney Top rose above its base. "Well, there's peace enough for any man up there! You've got tobaccy to chew and there's plenty of water on the top, and I aim to leave you yore spy glass to keep tracks of things with. You'll be able to look right down that spyglass and see me out sparking Dulcie on Lover's Cliff any moonlight night from now on, Slim."

Brute, primitive contempt came out of him like a harsh, rusty sound. "Be real careful now you don't fall down that spyglass Pendenton! You ain't far from being able to right now, and yo're real liable to get a mite thinner before the vultures spit yore carcass out for useless!"



"You won't get away with this!" Slim rasped. "Some friend will cut sign it was a frameup!"

"No, they ain't going to cut sign because there ain't going to be any," Creigh chuckled with savage enjoyment. "I aim to leave this valuable hoss of yore's right here at the mesa foot, just like you would, and it will be found dead or adrift when the time comes. And that trap rock the old Injuns had in that chimney climb to stop their enemies is jist going to fall closed and jam by accident. I don't aim to dynamite the whole chimney, Slim—I'm jist going to nudge that rock closed."

The humor suddenly stripped from his face; it turned harsh and impatient and he motioned with his gun.

One last burst of stubbornness came up through Slim's toothpick body . . . a feeling which in a heavier, more self-assured man might have turned to the violence of making a desperate stand against these bad hombres. "Mebbe I don't aim to climb that chimney!" he grated.

Creigh's cruel lips slashed in a brutal grin. He pulled out a razor-sharp barlow knife and shaved black hairs from the back of a square-backed hand. "Apache told me once you could shave a man's belly flesh so thin you could see his guts right through it." He chuckled wickedly. "Shouldn't take more than a tenth the time with you it would with a real, honest he-man—'cept you ain't got no guts!"

That was the final word, the final insult—the last thing even Creigh thought of was not the claimed double cross, not losing the race, not even the girl, but Slim's lanky, inadequate toothpick of a body.

He climbed the chimney and had barely sprawled out on the mesa when the dull explosion of dynamite went off below. It was followed by the louder slam of the old boulder trap, and a slide of rock that blocked the chimney solid. He had been near to suffocating going down the chimney to make sure after that.

They tethered his pony to a rock below as Creigh had said, and sat sending off their hoots and jeers and insults up to him. Most of their remarks had to do with his own needlessness of vittles, and that a scrawny sliver of human tumbleweed like him didn't need to be afraid of vultures.

Then they had ridden off, leaving him to that flat top mesa silence; literally a dead hell blasting back the sun's torrid heat like a burnished frying pan, damned near freezing within an hour after sundown, open to violent winds churned up between night and day. It was the only place he knew in five hundred miles that managed to hook smack into a cloudburst or hail storm every evening.

There was water enough, and good water, and no snakes, and there was some dried grass and stunted greasewood that



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would smolder, and the dried guano of roosting birds burned a hot fire if a man could stand the sickening, acrid stench. There was not a vulture in sight when he hit the Chimney Top, but there were three hovering over him by sundown. Last evening, they caught the smell of his draining strength and came down to roost and wait and watch with that wicked finality of their loathsome, scavenger eyes, spitting the stinking excrescence of rotted offal from their craws.

Now he lay shivering on the rim, sobbing brokenly with a man's slowly crazing hysteria rising from defeat, desperation and fatigue. He wiped his eyes and watched the pass that led to Dulce, and then the writhing sea of morning mists closed in.

High overhead the vultures were already warming themselves in the sun, eyes gleaming with beady brightness down at him. He rolled on his back and grated up wild yells of hatred, and then fell inert with the effort of his spasm. Day's light crept down the mesa's sheer red sides and he peered over the edge, calling hoarsely for his pony.

The animal was his last contact with a world that lived, his last hope and only friend. Maybe it was the one thing on earth that actually appreciated his skimpiness, he thought and gave a hollow, mirthless laugh—it would sure appreciate him now; it would think he was just a feather riding it!

He called louder and got no answer, and a cold, uncontrollable terror began to shake him. It didn't make sense, but he was living for that animal—when the horse deserted, that day would be the end of him.

**H**E JUMPED to his feet and began to shout out crazily, ripping the sounds out of wracked lungs. Suddenly he caught the snort and broken tattoo of a running horse having its morn-

ing buck, and then there was a sound more beautiful than mission bells—its eager, friendly whinney. It had been off to whatever hole it had found for its drink and was coming back, as it had been trained. He saw it form out of a hollow's clinging shadows and take root to stare up at him, not seeing him, but knowing he was up there from his voice, and puzzled that he did not bring it up or come down to it, after all this time.

It had torn off its reins at an early stage and rolled off its saddle the third day. Now he saw that it had cast loose its bridle, and that put cold water running in his veins. For a bridle was the sign a horse took that it was wanted around for riding, and a horse without bridle or halter felt free to drift wherever minded in search of graze.

This was serious, a sign of life's last showdown, and a bitter reminder of how a man can let time and circumstance sneak up and overwhelm him simply by not having any plan. He reached for a chew and found he was down to a last quarter-plug; he sat with his legs spread, staring at it, the nearest thing to food and nourishment that he'd had. He could feel his weakness and fatigue and knew he needed the tobacco's stimulation, but more than that, he needed to know the horse was waiting. He told himself it would be hell now to find a way down from here and then find himself still marooned for want of a horse in this harsh, arid land. But the thought behind all that was that the horse had stuck by him, and this was pretty near the end, and the pony liked a chew of tobacco too.

He worried off half the plug and quid-ded it, waiting for light to better along the base. All the time he kept calling, talking to the horse, and knew from its nervousness and the way its ears twitched that it knew he had some need of it, but could not understand.

He sang down, "Chew, Bucky! Here



it comes—yore last chew from yore old man!" He found his spot and tossed the small black plug, and the horse heard it strike and went sniffing around until it found the tidbit.

He watched it through the spyglass, grinning with fond pride at its pace and movements and flowing rhythm, vaguely surprised behind his more immediate appreciation that a man half-starved and facing sure-fire death could still find fondness and pride and humor in him.

The sun's first rays tipped down and lay level and warm upon him, bringing the primitive, elemental assurance of its golden light and heat. No other light, no fire, did this same thing to a man; he felt better, tougher, and thought that perhaps the horse would hang around another day or so for another chew.

He pushed to his feet, finding his joints stiff, his muscles quivering, and his balance badly off. His belly was knotted tight around his backbone, but other than this gnawing pain and weakness he had no other sensations of hunger. He wobbled over to the old reservoir and used his hat for a drinking cup, soaking in the water's invigorating freshness.

The water was smooth as glass and he watched the reflection of those eternally circling vultures, hating them with a man's elemental instinct for scavengers and things of death; hating them doubly for watching him with their damnable cold, patient mockery, and for being able to look down on him with scorn.

"Not even a coyote is low as a vulture!" he grated to himself. "But even they ain't so low they're stuck up here the way I am!"

Self-contempt smashed at him out of that clear mirror; his weight, he judged, had dropped to less than ninety pounds. He hunkered there, staring out of sunken, fiery-circled eyes, with fresh futility corroding through him, and hating himself for being so poor a man that a tough

like Creigh would not even stoop to shoot him. A man like Creigh, now, vicious brute that he was, would still have figured something to do about this. Maybe it wouldn't have worked, but he would at least have tried to make the most of things and gone west like a man. No wonder Creigh had figured those buzzards were just about the right company for his last hours.

"But they won't even get a decent meal off you!" Creigh had taunted. "Mebbe they'll keep you for a special stock of toothpicks, Slim." His eyes had brightened with cruel humor and he chuckled. "We can tell from the pass when they begin to gnaw yore bones, boy! That'll be when they stop circling around overhead."

Well, they were still circling, but they had taken to roosting on the mesa top last evening, and Creigh had figured they'd do that, hissing their foul contempt at Slim through death's creeping panic. He fought the panic in him now. It was bad enough to die at any time, and hell to die alone at best; but dying in shame of yourself and the scorn of vultures was somehow worse than anything.

His pony's puzzled and demanding neigh drifted up, coming upon him at the instant of wavering uncertainty. It stripped his panic from him, and he found there was a solid calm and cold determination in him.

He sat back on his heels, tasting and judging this new feeling. Against its rooted solidity, he recognized the scattered, undirected way his thoughts and fears and miseries had been pulling him, getting his energies spread out in twenty trailless worries. Maybe, it struck him, this was just a cornered man's concentrated thoughts and feelings of his life's rambling; he had never dared think or hope or dream about the things he really wanted—he had been too busy guarding himself from the hurt and contempt of

contrasts, and from seeing himself as others saw him.

Now he had seen himself mirrored in that clear pool, and the reflection was not much to claim real manhood. But he was still alive after eleven blistering days and freezing nights, and winds that screamed at him, and of silence that whispered mockingly of black and spaceless eternity. He was alive in spite of those damned circling harbingers of death that shadowed him and spit at him with their rotten breaths. He slanted a sideglance of sudden violent hatred at the one that glided to a roost upon a boulder edge. Snatching a stone, he hurled it, and staggered the bird almost into dropping.

It flapped off heavily, but for that space it had been dazed and wavered; the fact stuck in him, like a bell sound circling in his head. He became thoughtful, searching his memory for stories of drygulched, horseless, rock-bound men and how they had survived, and finding a dim recollection that vulture meat was rank and tough but hardy, if a man could stomach the flesh.

It crossed his mind that a half-hour since, his stomach would have turned at the mere idea. But after studying that reflection of himself, and swallowing it, he could stomach anything. He gave a sound of bitter, ironic humor, eyes filling with a hard light that matched the glinting eyes of the now wary vultures. He cussed through flat lips that felt the skin thin against his teeth. He had scared the birds off, but take things easy, and they'd come back again.

**H**E STOOD there watching the birds of doom with narrowed gaze, carefully sampling and judging the strength and vitality left in him. There was probably no way down from that flat top in any case, but if there was, it would be tough, requiring strength; and for strength, he needed some

food--and there it was before him!

"Taste be damned!" he thought grimly. "I'll make broth in a hot clay hollow and funnel it down my gullet with my hat if need be!"

He thought of the girl; he thought of her saying once, "Look at all the scrubby horseflesh you've found something special in and built up so they made the most of it!"

Then he thought of himself. Well, he was scrubby enough, he considered wryly, but about the only quality he had, outside of horsemanship, was his skinniness, and that wasn't much good to a man up here. Yet maybe at that it might be useful--maybe it would let a weakened man crawl out to one of those vulture perches where a heavier man would not have the strength.

He stretched the night's cramps out of him and made a circuit of the mesa rim for the hundredth time. It was high sun before he found what he expected; time and weather had fluted those walls smooth; there was no slightest worthwhile crevice or crack a man could work down. He studied the vulture aeries, perched precariously on the very edges of the rim, bone-littered and evil-smelling places that would have turned an angel grim. They had all been picked for their unreachable positions, and a weak man fighting a big bird on a weathered rim-rock's treacherous footing was looking for his glory ahead of time.

He snapped his wide lips with disapproval and gathered fuel while trying to think of something better. Creigh had left him his knife and he set to making a trench pit for an Injun stew and getting his fire started. If a man had to, he could cook inside his hat, or he could cut a lining for a clay hollow out of his chaps. The vultures watched him with beady eyes from overhead.

He used his hat for a bucket, washing a trench out of a seam of clay and hard-



pan. The sky was a molten cauldron that gave no warning of the cloudburst that ripped out of it, and he damned the flooding water that ruined his handywork before the rain stopped. Almost instantly, the ground was drying, but the cloudburst had filled the reservoir and overflowed it, and the run-off was channeling through his trench, and beyond it to the chimney.

He had known that the old chimney the Indians had used for a stairway inside the mesa had originally been carved out by water, but he had not thought about it much until now it struck him that with the bottom closed, the chimney must be damned near filled with water, unless it found its way to an underground river.

He moved over and sprawled at the entrance, dropping stones down into it and listening to the splashing echo. The chimney was turning into a tank, all right! Fresh discouragement pulled like taut hot wires inside of him, for that was the one hope of getting off the mesa. Even if the water broke through at the bottom, the race of it would rip hell out of those ancient steps and handholds. A three-hundred-foot shaft of water going out in one sluice might even suck in half of Chimney Top with it.

The biggest and ugliest buzzard was back, cruising its shadow across him, and he cursed it in a cracked voice. It would probably poison him, even if he caught it, and the food would do him little good now in any case, but hate and hunger and defeat were a seething violence in him—if it was the last act of his life, he meant to kill that bird. It would be one bitter taste of victory before he died; one small proof that at least he was better than a vulture!

He pulled out of his chaps and began to slice them, fighting off a trapped man's berserk temper in favor of cool judgment of a vulture's weight and strength. The leather was worn to uneven thickness and

strength, but with careful braiding, he managed a strong enough lasso of about thirty feet—strong enough to test with his own weight.

His stomach was knotting now with hunger and he was dead weary, but he made a snare loop and rigged it on the favorite rock that vulture used to sit and stare at him. He had no idea of surviving now, but all of life's bitterness and injustice and licking were knotted like his stomach into hatred of that evil bird—its death would somehow partially even the score with Creigh.

HE LEFT the snare set and lay on the mesa rim, watching evening's purple light sweep through that other world of tumbled hills that seemed so near. He made out the faintest dust trail hanging against an ochre-tinted butte and saw the vague blur of movement that was his buckskin ambling off for its evening drink. His eyes misted against his spy glass, and his slit mouth jerked out in a horseman's fondness for an animal.

He saw it stop and toss its head to smell at the airs and look back toward the mesa, and he figured the horse was smelling for him. It bucked a man up to know an animal was as loyal as that. Even facing death and filled with shame of his own manhood, it made him know there was some good in him just to have a pony's love. It put fresh imards into him, and maybe when the hunger pains were really gnawing, he'd take them better just for this.

The loathesome shadow glided against the sun, and he snarled and moved across to his lasso, glaring at the bird with fiery eyes. He sprawled out beside the trench, looping one end of the snare around his wrist. He knew the bird's habits. In about five minutes, now, if the novelty of the lasso had not scared it, it would glide down and light within the circle of the snare, and for twenty minutes sit with

his beady, malevolent gaze upon him with devilish optimism.

He lay down to watch the rock, but a tired and hungered man's spent vitality ebbed out of him, and he dozed there in the lifting heat.

He awakened with a loud flapping noise and a vulture's diabolic hissing in his ears. At the same instant he felt a violent tug upon his wrist. He had one of the bird's talons snared, and it was trying to take off in panicked fright, but its offbalance had pulled it to the ground and it was beating dust up wildly with its awkward flopping.

Slim let out a hoarse yell of fighting hate and leaped erect, but the bird felt the momentary slack in the line and lurches out, jerking him off his feet. The flopping, hissing, hollering, cursing tug of war began—a weakened but violent man against a strong but clumsy bird of almost half his weight. He couldn't catch his feet, and the bird had the full length of the lasso as its circle; he fought its wild movements, trying to dolly it in as he would a plunging colt or calf. But the bird had the crazed jerking power of its great wings.

He caught his feet with a hoarse yell of victory when the vulture flopped into the air, landing hard and crazily, and trying to catch balance, toppled down the chimney. The tumble cast loose the snare, slamming Slim down hard upon his backside, and he sat where he'd fallen with anger an explosive thing inside of him, listening to the fall of the bird down through the chimney. The shaft wasn't big enough to give it wing space, and it was knocking stones and rubble loose with its frenzied beating.

He heard the dim sound of bird and stones striking the pent-up water, and sat there with a man's fury at this last trick of a fate that wouldn't even let him have this one victory. Vaguely, he was conscious of another sound, and by instinct

knew that the bird's fall had been followed by a minor slide.

His mouth was a hard slash and his eyes pools of bitter fire. It was just one more sign of his miserable manhood. A decent sized hombre wouldn't have needed a foot bracing to haul in that crazily flopping bird. He moved to the rim, slapping his boots with his coil, heart-breaking remorse added to defeat.

Evening's purple shades were already thickening around the mesa foot, but he saw his pony down there running about excitedly, spooked by something that still held its curiosity. Shadow had gathered thick in the angle of a buttress from the mesa wall, and whatever was spooking the pony was in there.

He pivoted from the rim with self-disgust, when suddenly he became conscious that he had seen a glint down there. He threw himself on his face and looked down, and now made out the shine of water reflecting the sundown sky. Not heavy water, not a torrent, but enough to show that a trickle had broken through near the buttress top. The water had weakened some soft spot and the bird's fall with the attendant rock slide had broken through.

A hoarse sound of mixed hope and fear tore from his throat. He wheeled to the chimney opening and stared. A sharp draft came against his hot flesh.

HE COULD just make it out then, the faint but slowly growing flicker of outside light on water. It was a real breakthrough, not just a seep, and at the water-level, where there'd not be a chimney-gutting gush of the trapped waters. It had probably been coming for several days, and the cloud burst plus the small avalanche had pushed it through; it had been the smell of that clean sweet rainwater that drew his pony's whinney earlier.

He was shaking with excitement harder



than he had yet shaken with fatigue and hunger, and he lay pulling his nerves in hand, judging what to do. There was no indication that he could get through the water break even if he got there safely; less that he could find a way down the buttress angle if he got through. Except for that little reflection of light inside the chimney, it was black, and rain water must have raised havoc with the old steps and footholds. The break was on the sun-down side of the mesa wall, but the sun was already dropping into the far hills.

And yet, a night's wait to a hungered man might mean the complete end of his strength—and there was special providence to this. Creigh had thought of Chimney Top as a special form of cruelty and contempt. He had figured the crazing sight of the buzzards, and to let Slim keep his spyglass, knife, matches and tobacco were a part of this picture.

"And by the Almighty," Slim rasped to himself with sudden steel in his tone, "a man my weight and size can go where a heavier man could not!"

His face slit with a grim humor, and steadying himself, he went over the edge, feeling his way down. The old Indians had done a good job with their carving; he was almost at water level before he found difficulties. But it was the steepest part of the climb, and he stopped where the first light filtered around him quivering with strain, and knowing he would never have the strength to pull back up there.

The low sound of running water was a thing that set his heart hammering as he turned to study the breakthrough. From above, it looked like a bare wedge of a crack, with the water eating down along it, but slowly, not widening it at all. The light that came through was sun-down's bursting flare of crimson-yellow.

His lips flattened against his teeth as he found footing and lowered himself to an even level. The edges of the crack

were jagged, but there was a chance—he turned sidewise and wedged in, and suddenly batted his eyes against day's still bright light, and found that he was through.

Every muscle in his body felt scraped and beaten, and for that instant of looking down the remaining hundred feet, he could not feel a shred of strength left in him. But his pony was down there trotting nervously around, and whinnied at him, and one throbbing thought was surging through him, "One pound more—one inch bigger—and I couldn't have gotten through!"

It made the hunger and the worry worth while and it gave him a pride in that toothpick body of his that he'd never before known. It was just as serviceable as any other hombre's, and mebbe more so right now, he thought with a deep, savage suck of wind.

A man didn't think too clearly at such times, and maybe it was just as well. He had his lariat; it would not have held many men, and he was not sure of how long it would hold him. He worked his way down by cornices and balanced boulders that did not look as if they'd hold a bird. When he hit bottom, his heart-beat was shaking his whole frame, and he stood in thickening shadows staring at what was left of the lariat, which was less than half. One hand was raw clean to the bone.

He went over and sat on a boulder, and his horse was acting as if it were going mad. He sucked for wind while the sky turned from amber light to soft blue-black. Physically he was beaten such as no killer bronc had ever beaten him in his life. But he was alive, and figured to live out his hunger; and thinking on what a damned hissing scavenger bird and his toothpick body had done for him, he laughed.

It was a grim laugh and it was a grim light in his eyes as he rubbed his pony's

ear and told himself with no lingering contempt, "Well, you ain't got much to go on, Slim, but you've done all right on what you had! Mebbe we'll find a few hombres would like a taste of what a walking skeleton can do, now, Bucky! Mebbe we'll jist have a look-see and a smell of what really makes a man."

He gave a deep fierce chuckle in his chest and felt a man's tough-fibered and decent sense of pride. Ten hours later he rode straight up to Dulcie's house, and half falling from fatigue, still managed to find spirit to almost beat her door in.

She answered with a six-shooter in her hand, and clutched him in, pushing him down on a sofa with a capable woman's self containment of a million questions, and pushing coffee to heat while she scurried to see what liquid nourishment she could find. She sat across the table watching him fight a starved man's desire to wolf his food, smiling softly for all that he looked like a fire-blackened scarecrow.

He felt strength flood back into him and he washed, and let her sterilize his hand. But he pulled it back when she went to bandage it.

"That can wait," he told her, "until after I find Creigh!" The ring of iron was in his tone and he picked up her gun and jammed it into his belt.

A glint of understanding threaded her eyes and turned them harsh as a cold wave dropping from a winter sky. "So he jumped and dry gulched you, Slim?" she asked then. "I had a suspicion—I reckon the whole town did."

He gave a note of ruthless humor. "There wasn't much dry or gulch about it," he rasped. "But that was all was lacking!"

**H**IS gaze softened on her, and his hollow face flushed noticeably, even through his burn. He said, "You look mighty purty with yore hair

down and in a flannel nightgown, Dulcie, but I dunno what folks will think at my going out of here at this hour."

She matched his flush and turned from him. She told him roughly, "I reckon my reputation can stand it, but not as a habit, Slim!"

"I figured it might be a middling good habit," he muttered. "With a gold ring to back it."

She lifted her gaze as he opened the door against the paling night. She looked at him with eyes radiant as the brightest starlight. She watched him vault onto his pony from the stoop, and then she told him, "I'm glad it happened, Slim!"

He shot her a startled look. "Glad to see me looking like a bag of picked bones, Dulcie?"

"You ain't any bag of picked bones, Slim, and you ain't fiddlefooted any longer. Whatever happened, you plumb put on weight and stature. You've come back a mighty solid man a woman would be lucky to be tied to."

He touched the gun lying against his warmed, filled belly. "Mebbe I'll need the loan of some of that luck for what's to be done first, Dulcie!"

"I ain't worrying," she told him. "He's been dead drunk every night since this happened—he couldn't fight his own shadow!"

She came out on the stoop, knowing the noise probably had every neighbor watching, and pulled down his head to kiss him. "Jist don't give him no more chance than he did you, Slim," she told him. "But don't kill him. Just give him a brute's gun beating and make him crawl and whine for mercy."

"You think I can do it?" he asked.

"Slim, I think you can do anything you want to now," she said.

He rode out through the yard and turned down-street with the taste of her lips sweet in him as the moist, warm touch of the first spring thaw winds. He



stopped at the fringe of town, slipping from his horse, and crossing through the fluid, blue-gray shadows, stepped quietly through the door into the whiskey-soaked noise and light of Harlan's deadfall.

The place went quiet, and Creigh stared, shoving a girl roughly from his lap, but rising like a man in a stupor.

He blurted hoarsely, "Ya couldn't get down! Ya couldn't last it this long, anyway! Not a spindle-shanked, rickety little toothpick like you!"

Slim came forward with his head tipped down and his thumbs resting on his belt. "Next time you try stranding a man in a vulture's nest, be sure he's fat as you are," Slim grated. He gave a breath of mixed scorn and pride. "It don't seem to be a man's size that makes a man's guts, Creigh," he growled. "And to prove it, I came back in from Chimney Top jist to whip the hell out of you before my wedding!"

Creigh's mouth jerked. He looked wildly at the frozen faces around him, men's eyes turning hard with understanding of about what had happened when they heard of Chimney Top. He rasped, hard breathing, "Buzz—Gaff—where are ya? This hombre's gone loco—throw down on him!" But only the fading drum of their hoofbeats answered him.

Creigh stood frozen, trying to bolster liquor and surprised, shaken nerve, looking from face to face for help and friends. But all he saw was the merciless harshness settling in all these hard men for him and all their respect for Slim. Suddenly he felt the impact of their molten hatred, and utter carelessness of what mayhem was about to be committed upon him.

A sob jerked from him, the sob of a frightened man, and he clawed for the gun at his hip. But fear and the desertion of his partners turned his movements slow and jerky, and his gun was not half clear when Slim's gun slammed his head. He was disarmed and beaten

until he pitched in his own blood and crawled there, whining. He lifted his mashed face once with a licked man's desperation, pleading with the crowd, "You just going to stand there?"

"A spindle-shanked, rickety little toothpick like him?" a bearded giant mocked him. "Sure, why not, Creigh, and if he needs it, I'll help him!"

Creigh's battered head fell back into the crimson soaked sawdust and he sprawled blubbing, but still crawling from the sight of a better and a tougher-gutted man who could find his way back half dead, and still find spirit and pride to figure a wedding and then come and lick hell out of twice bigger man!

He was crawling from a man who wasn't ashamed of the skimpy way nature had ridiculed real manhood when it made him—and who didn't know when he was licked and fought his way back from his own grave!

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# HELL RIMS THIS RANGE!

By  
**TOM W.  
BLACKBURN**

## CHAPTER ONE

*"I Like Snakes—When They Crawl"*

THE hot Nevada wind rolled down the long slope of Sun Mountain like a surface blast of the sultry, water-heated air of the deep shafts whose tailings made a periphery of debris about the slanted patchwork of Virginia City, far above. Cleve Van Doren hammered the incandescent globule of the last fluxed spot in the lip of a scraper down into a smooth, tightly-knit weld and signaled to the teamster standing idly by with his animals that the scraper was ready to roll again. Svenson, the smith, cranking at his forge, wiped the sweat from his face and grinned appreciatively.

"You make the kind of boss that ain't, Cleve," he said. "Construction engineer, but you got the time and enough calluses on your hands to turn to on a forge when the smithy's got more work than a





*"The time to kill a snake is when it crawls—  
an', mister, I aim to make you crawl — to  
your grave!"*



He had gone less than a dozen rods  
when four men broke from the brush  
and darted into his path . . .

man can do. By hell, we'll build this road all right. I'll take any odds on that!"

Sloshing grime from his hands and forearms in the quenching tank, Cleve Van Doren grinned.

"I'll take odds, too, Svenson," he said. "But we'll be taking them on the short end. There's a few gents up on the mountain who don't want rails and they've got enough Comstock silver to give us a hell of a fight before we get a Comstock railroad."

"The devil with them!" Svenson growled. "Whip 'em, Cleve. Hand-whip 'em!"

Van Doren's grin narrowed. He tilted his head out toward the sprawling construction camp and the scarred line of the survey looping down the slope of the mountain.

"It's not too easy, Sven. Take a look. Here comes a couple of the boys I was talking about, now. Think they'll take a hand-whipping quietly?"

The smith stared out into the brilliant sun. Two men in top-hats, followed by half a dozen fawning clerks and secretaries, were striding rapidly up the hill from a dusty carriage drawn up at the edge of the camp. Both were easily recognizable.

"Aaron Grayson and Mr. Sloane!" the smith breathed. "They're bucking you, Cleve? It don't make sense. Why, they own half the Comstock. They've got more to win by getting a rail line built from the mines down to the mills than anybody else in Virginia!"

"Sure," Van Doren agreed. "Their Pacific Syndicate has its hands in everything. But since the top-grade ore has already been freighted out by wagons and the stuff coming to the surface now isn't high grade enough to pay the wagon freight, the syndicate has got a good chance to buy up the rest of Virginia at freeze-out prices. Not that Grayson and Sloane don't want to see this road built.

They do. But not now. Not until every mine owner and claim owner and tradesman in Virginia is against the wall and they can buy him out. Not until the whole Comstock belongs to them. Then they'll want the road. They'll build it. And what they've taken out of Sun Mountain this far won't be pennies to what they'll make, then!"

**S**VENSON swore unintelligibly. Van Doren slid into his dusty coat and walked out of the smithy's lean-to into the full sun to meet the two approaching men. Aaron Grayson's beefy face was apoplectic in the heat. John Sloane's narrow, bloodless features seemed impervious to the sun and the blistering wind, alike. Cleve thought the appearance of the two men in this moment completely characterized them. Grayson was the dynamo, the fused powder, the smoke and the thunder of the pair. His was the quick anger and the savage retaliation. But it was Sloan who laid the shrewd plans and watched them mature with cool, certain confidence. There was probably a heart somewhere in Aaron Grayson's big bulk—perhaps even a streak of honor. There was neither in John Sloane.

Grayson swung his hand angrily over the sprawled construction camp—the crowded tents of the veteran Chinese graders Cleve had hired from surplus Central Pacific crews, the team corrals and teamster's shanties, the dusty activity along the line.

"This is damned foolishness, Van Doren!" he said as Cleve came up. "It is senseless waste at a time when we can't afford to waste a nickel. This has got to stop. You'll never build a railroad and this is the wrong time to try!"

"Every cent that goes into this road isn't wasted, Mr. Grayson—as a matter of fact, it's invested in the future of Virginia City and of Nevada!"

"The future of Virginia City!" Gray-



son snorted. "Man, you're crazy! Every mine on the Comstock is reporting a decrease in silver values. There aren't half a dozen shafts producing enough metal per ton to keep themselves operating in the black, and here you're trying to spend two million dollars of the camp's money, carving your initials on this mountain. With millions invested in Comstock properties, the Pacific Syndicate can't allow you to go on with this!"

"We've been through this before, Grayson," Cleve snapped. "This railroad is one thing your damned syndicate doesn't have its dirty fingers into. It belongs to Virginia City and Virginia City wants the road built. It picked me to do the job and I'm going to do it!"

Grayson's apoplexy appeared more imminent.

"You stubborn fool, what do we have to threaten you with to make you see sense?"

"Easy, Aaron!" Sloane cut in quietly. "We don't have to threaten Van Doren. Let him look at a few facts. That's all. Van Doren, you know our bank holds a great deal of paper on Comstock property."

Cleve nodded.

"Sure. You made all the loans you could. That's your way of getting ownership—I lost a claim to you three years ago that way. The big squeeze. Sure, I know about your loans."

Sloane was imperturbable.

"Then you understand we've got to protect our investments. This railroad scheme of yours is a crazy one. Some good touches—like putting that little dancer in charge of your stock sales in Virginia. A cheap little thing, but with appeal, all right. I hear the stock's sold well. And that's what has disturbed us. When men who owe us money buy into a crazy proposition like this, our own security is threatened. To stop construction on your rail line, we're prepared to buy out the stockholders in the Virginia and Truckee

Railroad for two hundred thousand dollars. Figuring in what you've spent out of what you've already taken in on stock sales, you ought to be able to refund the original investment plus fifteen per cent profit on every share with that much money to work with. It's a fair offer, we think."

"Two hundred thousand dollars," Cleve murmured. "It's worth that much to kill the Virginia and Truckee before we've really started grading? Then I'd be a fool not to hang on until we're practically ready to start our trains running. Think what it'd be worth to you to put us out of business by then. Sorry, Mr. Sloane. I've got to hang on. Owe it to my stockholders."

Sloane smiled icy.

"With a list of your stockholders, we could check against our loans and by beginning to call them in, we could make it pretty tough for every backer of your line who owed us money. Most of them do, I'm sure. Do you owe your stockholders that particular kind of trouble, Van Doren?"

"More squeeze," Cleve said. "Might make me sweat a little, too—if you had a list of our stockholders. You're as likely to get that as you are to get any eye teeth!"

Sloane opened his coat pocket and pulled out a sheaf of papers. The wind rattled them.

"I hadn't counted on your teeth, Van Doren," he said, "but here's the list. The little dancer in Virginia City who's been peddling your stock for you was very cooperative."

"I think you and Grayson had better get out of my camp, Sloane," Cleve said softly. "If you know how to run, I think you'd better start. I'm getting a little steam up, and when I'm steaming, I sure play rough!"

John Sloane put the list back in his pocket and nodded to his companion.

"Let's go, Aaron," he said. "Too bad Van Doren doesn't realize how rough we can play."

The two men turned and moved unhurriedly back through the camp toward their carriage, their entourage of clerks and secretaries following them at a respectful distance.

"Me, I like snakes that can crawl," a voice said at Cleve's shoulder. He turned. Svenson had come out of the smithy. "Now what do you think will happen, Cleve?" he added.

"A little errand in town," Cleve answered grimly. "A talk with Miss Nan Defoe."

"That's a errand I wouldn't mind running," the smith said to him with a sideways grin.

"You would this time. Maybe Sloane's right, calling her a cheap little dancer. She's sold us out. They've got our stockholders lists."

Evenson swore in surprise and puzzlement.

"Miss Nan might clip a man if she figured he had it coming for some reason or another. But she wouldn't sell out Virginia City. Hell, she's the queen of Sun Mountain, Cleve. That means more to her than anything else."

"Ever hear of money, Sven?" Cleve asked bitterly. "Grayson and Sloane have got a lot of it. And who really knows what's most important to a woman? Keep an eye on the crews for me till I get back. Those Chinese are used to Central Pacific bosses. They work best when somebody's watching them."

Sven nodded.

"They'll keep dirt moving, Cleve. But you walk easy in town. If you got to make trouble, make it quiet. Them two that just left would like to hang your hair on their belt. They got a big payroll in Virginia. They could heap a lot of trouble on you if you started anything up the mountain."

## CHAPTER TWO

Steel Buster

THE office of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad was a small frame shack on E Street, set square with the right-of-way on the survey sheets and on the spot where Cleve Van Doren hoped eventually to raise the Virginia City Station at the Sun Mountain terminus of the road. Van Doren came rapidly down the walk and swung into this. A carefully brushed hat and a malacca cane rested across the table in the outer room. From the inner came the sound of voices. One of them was the throaty, cadenced music which was Nan Defoe when she was pressing an argument. Cleve seized the handle of the door and flung it open.

Nan was dressed in a long duster, with a riding hat tied close to her head. There were little smudges of dust on her cheeks and the marks of reins were still on the gloves she wore. She glanced up, welcome in her eyes as she recognized Cleve. He paused an instant, thinking that no woman in the world could look always so perfectly right in any costume as this long-legged girl who had danced her way into the heart of Virginia City. Then his eyes moved on to the other occupant of the room. A small man, dapper, with the civilized encrustment of San Francisco still apparent on him. Immediate antagonism rose in Cleve. Sloane and Grayson were California capitalists, too. Was Nan making another deal to spike the road?

"Cleve, good!" Nan said. "Here, Mr. Ralston, is our construction engineer. I'm afraid the drive I gave you along the upper section of our survey didn't tell you much. Mr. Van Doren can answer all your questions, I'm sure. Cleve, this is Mr. Ralston, of San Francisco. He's interested in our railroad."

Cleve ignored Ralston.

"And so were Grayson and Sloane,



weren't they?" he snapped. "What did they promise you for that list of stockholders, Nan—a new dress—or was it a house in San Francisco?"

Color came up in the girl's cheeks.

"You've got three big crews working down there on the mountain, Cleve," she said quietly. "Tomorrow is Saturday. Ever think, the last couple of days, what you were going to use to meet your payroll? Ever think how many of them would stay if you didn't have their pay?"

"The first man that quits one of my crews for some quick-spend dollars he'd burn up in town, anyway, has got to whip me before he gets off the job!"

"Big talk, Cleve. Sure, I know you mean it, but you can't whip a hundred and fifty veteran Chinese graders and half that many Irish teamsters. I sold the stockholders list to John Sloane."

"And put every one of our people who owe his bank money right square in his sights."

"They'd have been there in a few weeks, anyhow, Cleve," the girl argued. "Sloane would have found another way of discovering who they were. We can't get around the fight ahead of us by hiding. We've got to take it as it comes. And the five thousand dollars Mr. Sloane paid for that list will meet your payroll tomorrow!"

The girl took out a wad of bills and tossed them down on the table.

"Nan, I'm afraid I've made a mistake," Cleve said slowly.

The man Nan had introduced as Ralston smiled.

"Sounds like it, Van Doren," he agreed pleasantly. "But the real mistake was John Sloane's. He doesn't know it, apparently, but I think for the first time he's run into somebody who could out-think him on his feet. Miss Defoe, I salute you!" Ralston paused, glancing from Nan Defoe to Cleve. "As a matter of fact, I salute both of you. I've reason to

appreciate your efforts particularly. My group has had its own engineer over the route—a Mr. James—but we lacked the courage to plunge in on the road itself—" Ralston paused. "I'm happy to tell you that our indecision is past, however. My group is ready to back you."

Cleve backed onto the edge of the desk.

"I'm not sure we need backing," he said abruptly. "Nan and I and the boys in Virginia who've raked a little cash together for us have been doing all right, so far."

"No reflection on Miss Defoe's abilities, Van Doren," Ralston said with a tightening of his smile, "but there isn't two million dollars in Virginia City these days, and it'll cost every nickel of that to build the Virginia and Truckee. You're against Grayson and Sloane. You'll need help."

"You talk about your group, Mr. Ralston," Cleve said. "I don't like dealing with groups. I like dealing with men."

"You'll like these men," Ralston said. "They're respected in San Francisco. Mr. Darius Mills, Mr. William Sharon, and myself."

"The Bank of California," Cleve breathed. Ralston nodded.

"That's right. We've been battling Grayson and Sloan, their syndicate, and their Pacific Bank, for months, on the other side of the Sierra. I can assure you, Van Doren, that my partners and myself and our stockholders would consider a large investment in the Virginia and Truckee well spent if it broke the back of the monopoly Grayson and Sloane are trying to build. We want to break their syndicate. You want to save Virginia City. I think we can work together."

"Trading control by one bank for control by another doesn't fit my book," Cleve said.

"Control?" Ralston answered. "I'll be honest, Van Doren. The Pacific Bank has pressed us so hard that we couldn't

buy control of your road. At best, we'll be able to let you have small blocks of cash when you need it most—if you don't ask for it too often. We can let you have Mr. James' surveys, to save you the expense of final engineering on the balance of your line. And we may be able to arrange credit for you when you're ready to buy rolling stock and the like. We can't go beyond that—and what we are able to do must be kept in absolute confidence. If the Pacific Bank outfit learned what we were doing, they could bring pressure to bear in San Francisco which would force us out. Can you accept our help on that basis?"

"It sounds square," Cleve said, "and we're after the same scalps. The Virginia and Truckee could accept help on any basis that is honestly offered. We're grateful, Mr. Ralston."

The San Francisco man gave Cleve his hand, then turned to Nan Defoe.

"Perhaps this is unnecessary," he said, "but I'm familiar with how the Pacific Bank syndicate operates. There is only one commandment in the rule book Aaron Grayson and John Sloane use—anything goes to show a profit."

"There's only one rule in our book, too," Cleve answered. "We mean to build the road."

Ralston laughed, stepped out into the sunshine, and hurriedly crossed the street. Nan Defoe seized Cleve's arm excitedly.

"That does it!"

Van Doren scowled.

"We've a quarter of a million dollars in sight in Virginia City. Maybe that much more in Gold Hill and Carson City. And that before the Pacific Bank outfit really clamps down. It'll shrink when they do. Then there's Crocker and Huntington and Stanford and Hopkins. They're good businessmen. They've just finished their Central Pacific, through Reno. They'll want Comstock business. They'll want us to junction with them at Reno. And we

can't do it, to begin with. So they'll fight us, too. Ralston's promise helps, but even if he comes through, we'll be nearly a million dollars short of what we need."

"Why not build to Reno first, instead of Carson City, and put the Big Four of the Central Pacific on our side, then?" the girl asked.

"Because the Comstock mills are down on the Carson river and we're building the road to get Comstock ore to the mills, not to make friends."

"Then we've got to trust the Comstock itself. We've got to trust the men who are digging in the stopes. We've got to believe that Virginia City will help us when we're down to the last ditch. Maybe a new lode will turn up, Cleve."

Van Doren smiled. "We've got to believe in something, because we're sure as hell going to lay those rails."

Nan Defoe's grip on Cleve's arm tightened. "Since you're here on the mountain, how about dinner tonight before you go back to the camps, Cleve? I think I've earned a good meal out of that nice pile of green money Mr. Grayson paid over to me."

Van Doren shook his head.

"I don't want to stay away from camp that long. And Nan, don't be stacking any more chips against Grayson and Sloane. They were pretty smug about you. They play a stiffer game than you think. And the next time you make a deal with them, you may not have a wad of bills to prove you were right. Without them, you'd have a hard time making me or anybody else believe you were still pulling for the road."

The girl's eyes hardened.

"You'd search your grandmother for poison before you'd let her cook you a meal, Cleve Van Doren!" she said. Pushing past him, she went out onto the street. Cleve wadded the roll of Pacific Bank money she had collected from Aaron Grayson into his jacket pocket and fol-



lowed her, closing the Virginia and Truckee office door behind him.

IT WAS nearly sunset when Cleve rode out of the ravine he had followed most of the way down Sun Mountain and came onto the bench above his grading camp at the site of the upper portal of the American Flat tunnel. He reined his horse up sharply. There was still sunlight, so the crews should have been still at work, but the grade was empty except for half a dozen idle, untended scraper teams. The entire crew appeared to have funneled into the camp. And an instant later, Cleve realized not they alone could account for the press of men jammed among the tents and shanties. There were outsiders in the camp, and outsiders in that number more than spelled trouble—they were it.

He lifted his horse into a full lope down the graveled, dusty slope. He had gone less than a dozen rods when four men broke from the brush and darted into his path. One of them seized the bridle of his mount and jerked the animal to a halt. Another seized Cleve's near leg, even as he belatedly reached for his belt gun, and hauled him from the saddle. The two others closed in. One of them swung a gun barrel, wiping it across the bow of Cleve's shoulders at the base of his neck, driving everything but surprise and

numbed hurt from him. One of the men spoke sharply to a companion.

"It's Van Doren, all right. Kite down slope and tell the boss we've got him. Tell him to take his time cleaning up down there."

The man ran off through the brush. One of those remaining lifted Cleve's gun. The other two backed off and let him sag unsteadily onto a rock. The numbness was beginning to recede from the blow across the base of his neck. He thought it had landed a little too low to accomplish the lingering effect evidently anticipated but he carefully continued to keep the sag in his body. As though with an effort, he swung his head up.

"What—what the hell is happening down there?" he asked unsteadily. One of his captors chuckled.

"Ever hear of the Comstock Miners' Protective Association?" the man asked.

Cleve nodded. The Association had been of great benefit to the men in the steaming, sulphurous stopes of the Comstock in the early days. By constant attack, it had raised day pay to four dollars and imposed reasonable working conditions. As a result, every man who worked underground in Sun Mountain was a member. There were no other miners' organizations of any importance in the camp. There was no need for others.

"Well," Cleve's captor went on

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amusedly, "for a while now the boss has been asking some of them what your Chinese were going to do when your road was finished. He started asking them if they wanted dollar-and-a-half Chinese in the stopes—or did they think Virginia City needed three hundred new laundries. The miners allowed they'd have to get rid of the Chinese and that now was a good time to do it. Just sit tight, Van Doren. Your graders are being run out of Nevada. That's what's happening down there."

"Boss?" Cleve repeated stupidly. "What boss is that?"

"Mister Grayson, Van Doren," the man answered. "Mister Grayson. The best railroad-buster in the business."

Cleve came up off of the rock on which he had been sitting. His informant was the closest of the three men who had remained with him. He hit the man hard an inch above the ornate buckle of his belt, slamming him into a clump of sage where he lay kicking ineffectually and retching for air. The other two bunched. One of these had Cleve's gun in his belt. He clawed for it. Cleve struck hard with his shoulder and the half-drawn gun fell free. Cleve caught it up, and brought the barrel of the weapon down solidly. The third man decided against shooting it out and, though he had his gun out, dropped it. Cleve slugged him and left him.

His horse had tangled its reins in some brush a rod distant. Cleve freed the animal, mounted, and rode recklessly on toward his camp. As he reached its outskirts, he could hear Svenson swearing with fine flaming Scandinavian fluency.

"You're a pack of damned underground hellions!" Svenson was roaring. "An unreasonable pack of mis-begotten, wall-eyed, mole-brained rock-pickers. I tell you these yellow queue-boys can move more dirt than any miners that ever lived and they're doing it for you at wages there ain't a one of you would take! You been

cheated into cheating yourself. Back off, damn you! Wait till Cleve Van Doren gets back. Just stick around and wait. That's all I ask!"

CLEVE saw what was afoot. Apparently under strict orders, the miners were not harming the Chinese graders. They were giving each man enough time to get out his little packet of personal belongings, then were tearing down the shanties which the Chinese had raised. The graders, accustomed to endless persecution, were accepting this change of luck with the philosophy of their race. Some, tiny packs on their backs, were already scuttling up over the bench toward the safety of the hills. For a squeeze-out, the whole affair was fairly orderly. But Cleve knew he could never replace the graders and so this was a deadly blow at his rails.

Riding into the center of the camp, he spotted Aaron Grayson, standing well away from the center of activity, before most of the crowd was aware of his arrival. He rode directly toward the Pacific Bank man, his gun in his hand and its muzzle trained on him, and motioned the other ahead of him. When he had reached the crowd, he reined up and raised his voice.

"For every shack that goes down from here on, I take a free shot, standing or on the wing, at Grayson!" he shouted.

Those engaged in pulling down one of the Chinese shelters halted abruptly.

Grayson was pale, but angry.

Cleve's voice rose another notch in pitch. "Miners, listen to me. You know what's happening in your mines. You know how long they're going to keep going in the face of present haulage costs. Only one thing can save your jobs, in the long run. A new bonanza, bigger than anything Virginia City has known yet might save them. But who wants to wait on a hope? This railroad can save your



jobs. It can make new ones. It can even make it possible for operators to raise pay as freight rates come down."

"We got no quarrel with the rails, Van Doren," a miner cut in. "We got no quarrel with you. But we won't swallow a bunch of Chinese that'll undercut us in the stopes when they're finished here!"

"This road is being built with your dollars," Cleve snapped in answer. "Every man in Virginia and Gold Hill and Carson will have some sort of a stake in it before it's finished. Labor out of the mines would cost four dollars a day. That's your minimum. I'm getting my graders for one-and-a-half. That's saving you money. As for the graders moving into the stopes, I've heard it said that only the toughest men this side of hell could buck the hot water and the fumes in the Comstock workings. Look at my graders. Any of you would make two of them. Think they could last underground? Think any of them are crazy enough to want to try it? You boys have been swindled into doing a dirty chore for somebody else that he didn't want to tackle, himself. Don't you ever get belly full of doing chores for the Pacific Bank?"

The last question hurt. There were men in the crowd who had been forced out of holdings, much as Cleve himself had once been. There were others who could plainly see the rising shadow of the Grayson-Sloane syndicate over every phase of life on the Comstock. The Pacific Bank was not popular in the mines.

"We're not doin' this for Grayson," one of the men growled. "For my money he belongs with them heathens."

Somebody else yelled, "Grayson don't belong here—strip him. Let him climb back up the brush of the mountain in his birthday suit!"

"Run him clean to Virginia!"

Cleve grinned and swung on Aaron Grayson.

"I'm afraid you're apt to have a rough

trip back to Virginia," he said. "Come back down in six months and you can ride up Sun Mountain in a palace coach, courtesy of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad, Mr. Grayson."

He turned back to the crowd, and continued speaking.

"Being a banker, Grayson's got short legs. He's a fat man and it's been a hot day. This isn't California. Here in Nevada, we figure on giving every man his chance. Every man of you stand where you are until Mr. Grayson has hit the summit of the first rise on the bench, there. Then cut loose."

Grayson glowered at Cleve, but gibes from the crowd were coming faster. Glancing quickly about him for assistance which was lacking, Grayson suddenly turned and started an unsteady, waddling run up the slope. Svenson plowed through the crowd toward Cleve.

"We got to get some of the graders to cut through the hills after them that have run out, already, Cleve," he said. Cleve shook his head with a wide grin, his eyes still on Grayson's laboring figure.

"No. They'll come back. They'll see Grayson, with the miners after him. They'll see the humor in it. And there's nothing a Chinese understands any better than something funny. When they've seen the Pacific Bank running up Sun Mountain, those that have already cut into the hills will know everything's all right again here at camp. They'll have their laugh and they'll come back. Besides, I brought payroll cash back with me. When that gets noised around camp, we'll have a full roster, sure enough."

"Payroll cash?" Svenson said. "I thought we was busted!"

"A present from Grayson and Sloane, Sven," Cleve chuckled. "Collected by Miss Defoe. A payment in advance for the damage the miners did here today. We'll call it that."

He grinned at the men.

## CHAPTER THREE

## A Lot of Licking

AT THE end of three months, drillers had finished reaming and timbering the six-hundred-foot bore of the American Flat tunnel. The Chinese had nearly completed the grade, a looping scar on the face of Sun Mountain which climbed nearly two thousand feet in thirteen miles through a series of curves and switch backs which totaled seventeen complete circles. On the Comstock men from the streets of Virginia City and Gold Hill were boasting with pride of the Virginia and Truckee.

From San Francisco, crossing the Sierra surreptitiously by private messenger, Bank of California funds crossed into Nevada occasionally when Cleve was desperate. Ralston and his partners were keeping their promise. Also in San Francisco, the builders of the Central Pacific saw news reports of the progress of the Comstock road, but made no overt move to connect the Virginia and Truckee to their own line. The Pacific Bank syndicate was also quiet. Ominously so. As wagon-loads of ties began to come down from the forests above Lake Tahoe to be spread along the right of way, Van Doren grew more worried. Sloane and Aaron Grayson were not through. Cleve knew it. And he waited impatiently for them to strike again.

Ralston and his partners had placed orders for rails. They began to pile up at the Carson City terminus, ready for the track gangs. Ralston had also placed orders for locomotives and rolling stock. Three from San Francisco shops were hauled to Carson and set up there. Two more, ordered from the Baldwin works in the east, were enroute by Central Pacific to Reno, from there to be hauled by freight wagon to Carson and the Virginia and Truckee rails. The Bank of Califor-

nia's participation in the building of the road apparently remained unknown by Sloane and Grayson. But Van Doren still worried.

In Virginia, Nan Defoe had shadows under her eyes and she had thinned down. More and more she haunted the streets, the saloons, the gathering places of the Comstock, selling fragmentary little blocks of stock wherever she could find a man with a little cash and faith in the road or a momentary weakness for a long-legged girl with a husky voice and red lips. Cleve did not question Nan's methods. She knew the men of the Comstock and he was convinced she was bringing in all the money there was.

But as the weeks passed, two more independent mines closed, no longer able to pay the three to four dollars a ton the freight wagon men demanded for moving ore down the mountain to the mills at Carson. And the confidence of the miners in the great lode under their feet decreased. The demands which went over the Sierra to Ralston grew heavier, mounting until the Bank of California was carrying the load of construction—until Cleve knew that a break with Ralston would stop the completion of the road cold.

The day came when the first spikers started laying rails, and Cleve drove them mercilessly, knowing that he was making a race against time—a race against the moment when the Pacific Bank syndicate would fire the broadside it had unquestionably been long preparing to destroy any chance of the road's completion. He drove himself. He saw neither Nan or Ralston. One day followed the one before it with nothing more to mark the passage of time than the number of lengths of rail laid. The track-laying crews were within sight of Gold Hill and just over the ridge from Virginia City, itself, when Aaron Grayson and John Sloane touched off their long carefully prepared powder.



Cleve's first warning that the chips were down was Nan Defoe's hurried arrival in camp.

"It's happened, Cleve," she said bitterly. "There isn't a cent left in Virginia City we can touch. The Pacific Bank cracked down this morning on every mine owner and business man and miner who owes them money. They've called every loan they can. With so many mines shut down, they're going to take title to half the property in camp that they don't already own. And the Central Pacific has announced they're going to build their own narrow-gauge line up the Geiger Grade from Reno to by-pass us. I don't think they'll deliver the two Baldwin locomotives we're supposed to get over their rails."

Cleve swore bitterly.

"We've got to have those two Baldwins," he said. "We've got to get them onto the rails the minute we've got the last section of iron down. Those three little San Francisco engines we've got at Carson won't be ready for service for weeks. What's the Central talking about? A line up Geiger Grade is ten times worse than our line up Sun Mountain. It can't be done. It's a bluff."

"But it'll stick, Cleve," Nan said wearily. "The Central has made history. The first transcontinental railroad. When it turns against us, it spikes the plain old faith a lot of the Comstock has had in us."

"Ralston said he'd back us when we needed it most. We've got to get to him. We've got to get him to call the Central Pacific off of our back. We've got to have enough more cash to finish our payrolls. If we can do that, freight to the mills will make it possible to repay everything else within weeks after we start operation."

Nan nodded.

"I'm tired, Cleve," she said. "I'm not even sure that we aren't beaten. But there's nothing more I can do in Virginia City. I thought I'd go down to San Fran-

cisco. I thought I'd go down to see Mr. Ralston. Maybe I can salvage something."

"Go ahead," Cleve said. "But don't quit. I'm not quitting here. Don't let Ralston quit. Get those two Baldwin engines delivered to Reno. I'll get them onto our rails. And I'll get our rails laid."

"Without money, Cleve?"

Van Doren bunched his fists.

"Without money!" he agreed tersely. Nan looked at him.

"What do we get out of this, Cleve?" she asked suddenly. "What is there for us, even if the road is finished? Have you thought of that?"

Van Doren nodded. There had been long nights in the camps when his body ached with exhaustion, when he couldn't sleep. Sweating naked on a cot in his tent, he had thought of what silver rails to the Comstock would mean to him. Something beyond satisfaction. Something he could touch with his hands. Something he could savor. Something about which he could boast to every man in Nevada. He rose and crossed to Nan.

"I can build grade in a hurry, girl," he said huskily. "But I can't take a wife the same way. Not with sweat on me. Not with a thousand things in my mind. Time—that's what the completion of the road means to me. Time to talk to you, to walk with you—time to love you."

"And if there's nothing else, that's enough for you, Cleve?" Nan asked.

Cleve reached out for her, bending his head above her face. Her lips met his. Grading and gradients, tunnels and troubles and the long frenzy which had been his part in the building of the road this far fell away from him. There was only the sunlight and the peaceful Washoe, far below, and the bulk of Sun Mountain behind him. There was only the knowledge that this was a woman thousands had wanted, but whom none had had. The knowledge that as a fortune multiplied a thousand times had come out of the murky

heat in the heart of Sun Mountain, there was a rich flood to be tapped in this girl. A dancer, a woman gossiped about in drawing rooms all the way from San Francisco to Virginia City, but with a strength to match the hungry strength in him. Together they were building the Comstock rails. He had used his fists and the iron in his body. Nan had used the weapons which had been given to her. He lifted his head after a long moment.

"Yes," he said in answer to her question. "Yes, it's enough for me. Is it for you?"

The girl nodded, her eyes soft.

"What I've done for the road has been done for you, Cleve," she said softly. "From the beginning. Because you believed so strongly in your rails, I've believed, too. I want you to remember that. If I fail in San Francisco, I want you to remember—"

She turned, then, and walked swiftly toward the buckboard in which she had driven down the roadbed from Virginia City.

**D**AYS after Nan Defoe's departure, when the last of the ties were spread along the right of way and Cleve had sufficient rails to complete the line—when all he needed was time and enough cash for his payroll for another three or four weeks, William Ralston arrived in Virginia and came down in a careening buckboard to Van Doren's camp. If the way Ralston was having himself driven did not forewarn of trouble, the man's expression as he climbed from the buckboard did.

"By God, Van Doren," he said thickly, "if I hadn't found you here, I'd have hired trackers to hunt you down! You've got questions to face. You ready to start answering them?"

Astonished at the ruddy anger in Ralston's usually mild face, Cleve bristled.

"Wait a minute, Ralston!" he snapped.

"I'm a damned busy man for questions. If there's any asked, I'll do the asking. Miss Defoe left for San Francisco three days ago—to get me some more payroll cash. Where is it?"

Ralston opened his coat and tossed an ominously thin wallet down onto the table in Cleve's tent.

"There's your damned money!" he said. "Now, do I get my turn?" Cleve nodded, frowning. "I've got to know what there is between you and that woman, Van Doren!" Ralston went on.

"Miss Defoe?" Cleve said. "All right, I'll tell you. A whole damned railroad's between us, Ralston. Has been since I drove the first survey stake. That help explain why I've half-killed my crews, trying to get this iron spiked down?"

Ralston nodded. His manner seemed to ease, but there was deep bitterness apparent in him.

"I should have known this wouldn't go as far as you, Van Doren," he said more quietly. "Let me tell you how your Miss Defoe got that packet of money for you. She pulled the same deal she did on that stockholders list months ago. The deal that impressed me, then. She sold out to Sloane and Grayson, again. She sold them all the details of the connection of my bank with this railroad for that little sheaf of greenbacks. And right now she's living in a hotel suite in John Sloane's San Francisco hotel. She's living there and hobnobbing with Governor Stanford and some other Central Pacific men—dining with Aaron Grayson—having herself a hell of a time while Grayson and Sloane are lifting the hair of the Bank of California."

"You're sure she let your secret out to the Pacific Bank syndicate?"

"Positive. They've discovered that our investments in this road and some other Comstock properties have spread us dangerously thin. They're bringing pressure to bear from all sides. Unless we can get



some revenue in—and in a hurry—they'll pull us down. And I don't need to tell you that when our bank goes, the entire Pacific Coast will be left in the Pacific Bank's hands—a third of the whole country, controlled by a single monopoly. That's what the Defoe girl traded off for a nice hotel room and maybe some new dresses and a few weeks of associating with the big men of the coast!"

Van Doren swore softly. He wondered if this was what Nan had been trying to tell him when she had begged him to remember at their last meeting—if she failed in San Francisco. Failed, hell! She had, even then, no intention of trying to win when she crossed the Sierra. Not for the Comstock. Not for the road. Not for Cleve Van Doren. Only for herself.

"There's only one thing my partners and myself can do," Ralston said bitterly. "We've been entirely out-played. Grayson and Sloane have been trying to starve down the Comstock so they could take it over. That's why they've fought your rails. My partners and myself have got to sell off our Comstock holdings—including our stock on your rails. The only place we can sell them is to Grayson and Sloane. They'll foreclose on everything else they've got here. Then, when the title's all theirs, they'll finish up your rails—which they'll control, then—and in two or three short weeks, they'll be making a fortune on rail-shipped ore without having spent a penny on the road itself. We've both been fools, Van Doren!"

"Mr. Bowker, our chief operating engineer, has been making us some ore cars and flats in the shops at Carson City," Cleve said. "My rails are nearly all down. If I could get the two Baldwin locomotives to Virginia from Reno when they get there, we could start hauling ore. And there's enough independent mines left to load every car we could roll. In weeks I could have the revenue your bank needs coming right out of your share of the

profits which will come from the road."

Ralston shook his head.

"I haven't any good news, Van Doren. It's all bad. Here's the rest of it. Your two locomotives are supposed to be in Reno, right now, but kept out of sight by orders from the Central Pacific offices in San Francisco because you didn't survey your line to junction with them. And if you could get them loose, you couldn't move them. The Pacific Bank has put pressure on the wagon freighters, to whom they've been loaning money. It wasn't hard to do. The freighters know this road will put them out of business, as far as the Comstock is concerned. They'd like to plant a foot in your ribs. So there isn't a wagon in California or Nevada that'll move a piece of Virginia and Truckee property. And without wagons you'll never get those engines up Sun Mountain."

Cleve dropped into a chair.

"Stall," he begged Ralston. "This cash you've brought in will maybe get my rails down. Almost all of them, anyway. And maybe I can turn something up in Virginia City. The road means life or death to the independents left in the camp. They can't let it die when it's this close to completion. And I'll get my engines up from Reno, somehow."

"Sure, right up the Geiger Grade with no roadbed to run on!" Ralston said. "I can't stall, Van Doren. I've got to save my bank. I'm to meet Sloane and Grayson in Virginia. I've got to sell out—to-day."

Cleve came up out of his chair, and said savagely, "The whole Comstock has got a stake in this road. Not one man or even one bank, however big it is, is going to stop us, now!"

"Be reasonable, Van Doren!" Ralston said. "You're fighting me now. You're fighting my partners and our bank. You're fighting the Big Four of the Central Pacific—all in addition to Grayson and Sloane.

Your railroad—even the Comstock—amounts to nothing against us all!” He put out his hand suddenly. “I’m sorry, Van Doren. I would have liked to see us win. I’m short on time, but I had to come down and tell you myself how our luck has gone—”

Cleve gripped the man’s hand. Ralston turned and left the tent. Cleve stepped out into the sunlight and signaled to Svenson. The smith crossed curiously. Cleve tipped his head toward Ralston.

“There goes a very fine man, Sven,” he said quietly. “A man who’s done a lot for the road—for the Comstock and Nevada. A man who should have a chance to do more. But he’s trying to cheat himself out of it. Take half a dozen of the boys you can trust. Follow Mr. Ralston into Virginia City. See he’s put up in comfortable quarters with everything he wants but his liberty. Do it quietly, so no one will know where he is. And keep him there till you hear the whistle of the first Virginia and Truckee train in front of the depot on E street in Virginia City.”

A slow smile spread across Svenson’s face.

“So we ain’t beat yet, Cleve?”

“No,” Van Doren answered quietly. “We ain’t beat yet.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Silver Runs Cold

WITH the money which Ralston had brought across from San Francisco—money Nan Defoe had sent and which Cleve regarded as a bribe, forced out of the girl by some last faint struggle of an expiring conscience—Cleve met his payroll a last time. Ralston had disappeared in one of the warrens of Virginia City. Svenson had disappeared with him, along with four of his Irish teamsters. Leaving his track crew spiking rails swiftly toward the now not too dis-

tant depot on E Street, Cleve pulled out from his camp with half a dozen teamsters and all the work stock left along the Virginia and Truckee line.

They pulled out at night, a company of puzzled men and sleepy animals, cutting around the shoulder of Sun Mountain and hitting the head of the Geiger Grade. Through the night they slipped and scrambled down the tortuous pitches and miserable going of the crude road which connected Virginia City with Reno and the main line of the Central Pacific. Van Doren knew he was leaving his rear unprotected, that the moment Grayson and John Sloane discovered the troublesome construction engineer of the V. & T. was not personally holding his camp together, that they’d move in for the kill. But his most important problem was rolling stock. Without locomotives, the rails up from Carson would be valueless.

Grazing his teams on the broad grass of the Washoe, off main lines of travel, and taking only two of his huskiest teamsters into town with him, Cleve showed up at the division office of the Central Pacific in Reno five minutes after it opened in the morning. When he had identified himself, the agent offered to buy Cleve breakfast.

“Sure, your Baldwins are on cars at the lower end of the yards, Van Doren,” the man admitted readily. “Waiting for clearances that don’t look like they’ll come through from San Francisco. And there’s been half a dozen toughs around town, keeping an eye on those cars the past week. Look, I work for a living, but I hope to hell I’m a railroad man. I don’t hold with any of this. I don’t know what the home office has got up its sleeve, but I do know we’ve got plenty of a chore trying to keep our line running like it ought, now it’s built, without digging into somebody else’s business. You’ve done some railroading, up there on the Comstock, from what I hear, with everybody



against you. If I had my say, you'd have your engines in an hour."

"Thanks," Cleve said. "How about sending a wire to your home office?"

"Sure," the agent agreed. "But it won't do any good. Those are big men, in San Francisco. They've just finished building a big railroad. I don't think you can make enough noise for them to listen to you, Van Doren. And if you did, there's no way for you to get your engines up the Geiger. None of the wagon boys will touch them."

"I'll worry about the Geiger when I've got my Baldwins," Cleve said bluntly. "Here—" he paused and scribbled a terse message—"here's the wire I want sent."

The Central Pacific agent read the message aloud, slowly:

"V. & T. construction crew have taken over town. Refuse passage to Central Pacific trains along main line until two Baldwin locomotives released from our yards. Agent, Reno."

Without comment, the agent tossed the message through a wicket to a telegrapher.

"Send this direct, over the company wire," he ordered. Turning back to Cleve, he ran his eyes over the two teamsters and grinned.

"You sure laid a lot of rails with a mighty small crew, Van Doren," he chuckled. "How about that breakfast, now?"

Half an hour later, when Cleve returned with the Central Pacific agent to his office, a reply from San Francisco was waiting:

AGENT, RENO:  
RELEASE ON V & T BALDWINS EN-  
ROUTE EASTBOUND PACIFIC EX-  
PRESS TODAY. THIS IS YOUR  
AUTHORITY TO UNLOAD WITH-  
OUT DEMURRAGE CHARGES ON  
ORDER OF V & T.

The Reno agent handed the message to Cleve with a wry grin.

"By hell, I think they believed in San

Francisco that the three of you could have stopped traffic both ways on our road."

"Mister, the three of us would sure as hell have tried if we hadn't gotten our release!" Cleve said quietly. "Where can I find a couple of good smiths?"

The Central man volunteered some men from his own shops. He went down into the yards with Cleve and supervised the unloading of the two beautiful brass and crimson-and-black Baldwin narrow gauges. The smiths from the Central shops, astonished by their orders, uncoupled tenders and bolted wide tires fashioned out of heavy freight-wagon tiring to the flanges on the drivers and trucks of the two little engines. Cleve sent one of his men out for the rest of the teamsters and the grading teams. Just short of noon, great strings of the heavy work animals were coupled to the forward drawbars of the two Baldwins and shorter strings to the two tenders. Reno, astonished, watched the two little locomotives roll down the streets and out onto the flats toward the distant, merciless slant of the Geiger grade on their own wheels. At the edge of the town. Cleve Van Doren breathed a deep sigh of relief.

He was certain that the Pacific Bank syndicate would have had the engines watched and he had expected trouble, getting out of Reno. That there had been none took a heavy load from his shoulders. He could now give his attention to working the blocky, mercilessly heavy little Baldwins up the harsh incline of the Geiger.

Aaron Grayson and John Sloane did not strike until the two locomotives were on the first bad pitch of the Geiger Grade, too far from Reno for help. The leading teams swung around a narrow turn to find the bridge across Steamboat Creek down and a party of mounted men waiting on the opposite bank with rifles across the cantles of their saddles. Cleve, back with the second locomotive, rode out around

the stalled teams to the near bank of the creek. His boss teamster was looking at the dismantled bridge.

"This is it," the teamster said hopelessly. "We can't fly these chunks of iron across and there's a limit to what horseflesh can do."

"Look at those bridge timbers," Cleve grunted. "If the bridge was up, it wouldn't hold our engines. Those fools went to a lot of work for nothing. We'll have to ford the creek. And you'll never know what horseflesh can do until you've tried. Hook all the teams onto the first engine. Lay on the whip going down this bank. She'll roll up the other side herself if you get her going fast enough."

The leader of the mounted men waiting on the other side girmed his horse forward a little and lifted his rifle.

"The first man into that water gets shot in his boots," he called sharply. "We're getting paid enough to do a good job of this, Van Doren!"

"Get the teams hooked up," Cleve said quietly to his boss teamster.

The animals were moved forward from the other engine and the two tenders. The teamster came back in a few moments doubtfully to report readiness.

"I'm going across afoot," Cleve said. "Follow me and lay on the whip."

The man across the creek rode a little farther forward.

"You've been warned, Van Doren!" he sang out.

Cleve dismounted and walked to the edge of the creek.

"It takes more than pay for a man to murder another—in front of a dozen team-driving witnesses. It takes guts for that—more guts than any white-bellied coyote that would work for the Pacific Syndicate has got. Get out of our way. We're coming across!"

He stepped into the water. The leader of the mounted men jerked up his rifle, but he did not fire. Perhaps there was

something in Cleve's grim fording of Steamboat Creek which checked him. Perhaps it was sight of the Irish teamsters, catching a little of Cleve's fury. After a moment of indecision, he swore savagely and set spurs to his horse. As Cleve scrambled up the far bank, the man reached him, his rifle clubbed and leaning forward in the saddle.

Jerking his hat from his head, Cleve leaped at the man's horse and slapped the hat blindly across its muzzle. The animal reared, throwing its rider off balance. Cleve caught at the man's rifle. The horse reared again and spilled its rider. Cleve rammed the butt of the rifle down into the man's face as he started up from the ground. Bending, he hooked a pistol from the man's belt, tossed it to his boss teamster, who had splashed through the creek after him.

"Warm that gun, Mike. Empty every saddle you can!"

Two or three of the mounted men had started to swing their weapons. Cleve fired at one, hit him in the shoulder, and knocked him from the saddle. The teamster boss cut loose, but his shot apparently found no target. Cleve swung the muzzle of the pistol toward another rider.

The mounted men milled hesitantly. Plenty of eyewitnesses to violence still lined the far bank of the ford. They hadn't counted on resistance. They held up hands, picked up their wounded and left.

"Get that engine across!" he belled at the stunned teamsters on the other side. Then, while whips cracked and the teams edged forward to put a strain on their harness, he spoke swiftly to the boss teamster.

"You've got a bonus coming for wading after me. Make it bigger. Take this rifle and the one that other syndicate boy spilled. Pick another good man out of your bunch and take a couple of horses. Get up on the ridge above us and keep watch, all the way into Virginia. Shoot



anything below that comes toward us."

The man nodded and retrieved the other fallen gun. The teamsters shouted and their animals labored. The *Virginia* rolled forward with increasing speed and dipped into the ford. Cleve Van Doren grinned exultantly. They had long said a Comstock road was an impossibility. What was climbing the Geiger Grade to a man who had built a Comstock road? The *Carson* would follow the *Virginia* and they'd both climb Sun Mountain.

AT NOON on the fourth day out of Reno, red-eyed with strain and lack of sleep, Cleve stood to one side at the head of C Street and watched the *Virginia* and the *Carson* roll down the rutted avenue into Virginia City. He was aware that the whole camp had turned out to see the end of his impossible climb up the Geiger Grade. He was aware that the crowd had turned out for probably even more than that. Once these engines were on their rails behind the depot on E Street, he would have completed his railroad. All Sun Mountain knew that. Aaron Grayson and his partner would know it, also. This was their last chance to break his back, to force the Comstock under their thumbs. And they would make their biggest play, here—now.

Reining his weary horse forward, Cleve passed the slow-moving locomotives and advanced on a tight knot of men blocking the street ahead. Among them he saw Grayson and Sloane. Svenson was also there. And top hats he did not know from San Francisco. Word that the fate of the Comstock hung in balance must have traveled far. He was within half a block of the knot when a soft, quick voice hailed him. He glanced into an alleyway between buildings. Nan Defoe was standing there, motioning desperately to him.

"Cleve—quickly!" she called. "Come with me a minute—down to the depot. Before you go on up there."

He turned his head away.

"Cleve!" Nan called again. "Come with me first! They'll break you—"

Cleve lifted the pace of his mount and rode on toward the knot of men in the street. Grayson scowled ferociously at him as he reined up.

"After repeated warnings and fair offers, you don't deserve consideration, Van Doren," Grayson said in florid, stentorian tones which carried along the street. "But I have been elected to speak for the rest gathered here. You have a huge payroll deficit in your construction camp. You owe suppliers here and in San Francisco large sums. You have made no accounting to stockholders of the vast amount of money you have spent on this ridiculous railroad scheme. You have drained Virginia City and her sister camps of precious cash at a time when cash was desperately needed here for further development of the mines. You have intimidated the Central Pacific Railroad and the Pacific Bank. You have made under-the-table deals with William Ralston and his partners in the Bank of California, a concern now admittedly at the doors of bankruptcy in San Francisco. I represent these people, the people you have injured. We are attaching all the property of your railroad—where it stands. We are placing you under an injunction to prevent further work of any nature until our varied claims are settled in full. Do you have an answer?" Grayson turned and looked over the crowd. He grinned. "If you have, I'd personally like to hear it!"

Sloane, just back of Grayson, was grinning, also. This was triumph. This was defeat. Van Doren brushed a hand wearily over his grimy face.

"Svenson, will you bring Mr. Ralston out here?" he called to his smith.

Surprise ran audibly through the crowd. Svenson disappeared. In a pair of minutes he came plowing along the walk, William Ralston moving behind him.

"Mr. Ralston," Cleve said quietly, "these men think they've been injured by the building of the Virginia and Truckee. I've held you prisoner for nearly a week. That makes you an injured party, too. But before you join these men, I want to ask you some questions."

Ralston had been staring up the street where the *Virginia* and the *Carson* sat on their clumsy looking temporary tires. His eyes drifted off down the slope of Sun Mountain to where bright new rails gleamed in the sun all the way to the terminus on E Street. He swung his head back to Cleve.

"I'll answer them, Mr. Van Doren," he said.

"If some investment owned by your bank began immediately to turn between twenty-five and thirty thousand dollars a month in dividends into it, would the California Bank be in any immediate danger of collapse?"

"No, sir. We'd be sound as silver."

"If your bank was in a sound condition, would it be willing to re-finance any Comstock loans now held and under pressure by the Pacific Bank—by Mr. Grayson and Mr. Sloane, here?"

"From a business standpoint, I can say my bank has long been anxious to increase its investments in Nevada silver properties. From a personal standpoint, I can assure you it would give my partners and myself the keenest pleasure to replace every dollar which Mr. Grayson and Mr. Sloane now hold over the heads of the men working the Comstock!"

Cleve swung back to Grayson and those grouped about him.

"There's your answer, gentlemen. Tomorrow the Virginia and Truckee will be ready to start moving ore down to the Carson mills. That ore movement will produce perhaps as much as fifty thousand dollars a month in dividends on the stock in the road Mr. Ralston's bank now owns. And Mr. Ralston's bank will be ready and

eager to relieve you of the pressure the Pacific Bank has put on you. Is there any need to tell you that freight revenues will permit the V. & T. to repay all its existing debts within its first month of operation? I think not. Now, if you'll kindly clear the street—"

"Wait a minute!" John Sloane snapped. "So we take off our gloves. Get this, Van Doren! There aren't three mines in Virginia City that will ship on your road. Maybe your freight rates mean low-grade ore can be milled at a profit, but we'll take a loss to prove we're right. With the property we hold title to and that we can tie up because of loans we hold against it, you're not going to get your freight. This is a dead camp, and your talk of big, quick money doesn't go. Maybe in the first days of the Comstock, when it was a great bonanza. But not now!"

There was a murmur of assent. Cleve heard it with a rising tide of bitterness. This was the one thing he had feared above everything else—that the men of the Comstock would lose faith in the riches of Sun Mountain—that they would believe the old days couldn't come back, even if a railroad were built and all ore could go to the mills. This was the thing for which he had no answer. Sloane seemed to know this and his thin smile widened.

"Wait!"

It was Nan Defoe's voice. She came twisting through the crowd, making room for two big Irishmen in her wake and two more, who were pushing heavily laden barrows up the street.

"This is what I wanted to tell you, Cleve," she said as she burst through the front ranks of the crowd. "So the days of the bonanza are gone, Mr. Sloane? Well, look at this—"

Nan spread her hands toward the two barrows. Men crowded in. Cleve saw knives flash as they dug at the rocky substance with which both barrows were



loaded, Cleve pushed over close to Nan.

"What is this?" he said sharply. "More by-play to Sloane and Grayson's account?"

"You fool!" Nan answered angrily. "I told you once your account was the only one that counted with me! Was it for Sloane and Grayson that I told Governor Stanford the day his agent's wire came in from Reno about your engines that if the Central didn't give you trouble now you'd build an extension of the V. & T. into Reno no later than spring? How else do you think you got your release?"

"You did that?" Cleve grunted. He didn't want to believe her, but he knew he had to. There was no other way to explain the Central's sudden release of the Baldwins. The Big Four were hard-headed. They couldn't be bluffed by a threat of violence from Reno, but they would listen to a proposition which would give them a Comstock connection at no cost to themselves. William Sharon and himself had been mistaken about this girl. He reached for her. She eluded him.

"Listen!" she commanded.

"What is it?" Cleve asked again.

"Money," Nan said. "I told you that when your back was against the wall, the Comstock itself would give you a hand, Cleve. It isn't really money, either. It's silver. Silver from a new strike. Almost pure silver, right out of the heart of Sun Mountain—freight for your road—something to give the men on the street enough faith to let you get started."

"A new strike?" Cleve breathed.

"A new bonanza. The big bonanza, Cleve! Those are the men who hit it. And as soon as they knew, they brought the news to me in San Francisco, thinking I'd know best how to make it help you. When things are quiet, Cleve, I want you to meet Mr. Mackay and Mr. Flood and Mr. Fair and Mr. O'Brien. This is just the beginning of the Comstock—not the end!"

Ralston hurried up and shouldered Nan out of the way without seeing her in his excitement.

"Fantastic, Van Doren!" he said. "Those few days you had me behind lock and key have saved the Bank of California and the Comstocks. Why, it's practically free silver. Mackay and Fair have agreed to bank with us and to let us negotiate their silver for the time being. Bullion, by the ton! I tell you, we'll crowd out the Pacific syndicate, now. I think, Van Doren, that's the important thing."

Cleve had found Nan again. He had pulled her close. He raised his head under the prodding of Ralston's insistence.

"No, Mr. Ralston," he said. "This is. This is all that's important at all, now. I've built the road. Now you'll run it, since your bank is the principal stockholder. Even the sound of a whistle is going to make me sick."

"But man, you'll want your share of the bonanza—your cut out of the new boom on the Comstock. You helped make it."

"I've got my share," Cleve grinned across Nan's shoulder. "Silver's pretty, but it runs cold to the touch. This doesn't—"

"Of course he'll have his share," Nan cut in briskly. "A construction engineer's fee on a two-million-dollar railroad should be a big one—and Cleve hasn't had a dime of his own from the road."

Ralston grinned.

"I might have to tangle with Van Doren's fists from the looks of it if I openly admired anything else about you, Miss Defoe," he said. "But I can say a word about your business head. I did once before. If you ever get tired of holding check reins on a wild man, come to see me. The Bank of California could use a fourth partner who sticks to business like you do!"

"Banking isn't my business, Mr. Ralston," Nan laughed. "This is—" She tilted back her head.

# TALES of the

by LEE

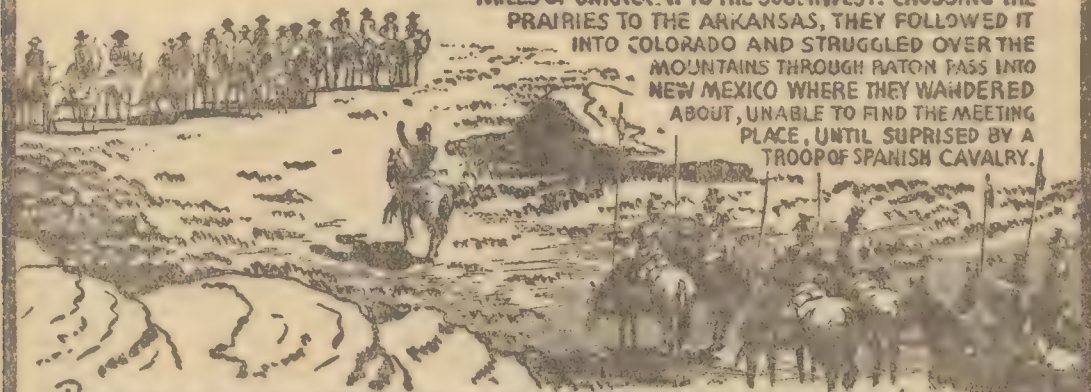
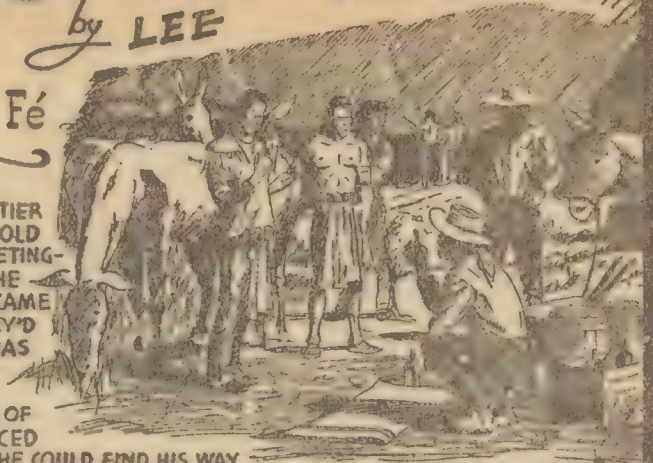
## Breaking the Santa Fé Trail

AN OLD TRADER AT FRANKLIN, FRONTIER OUTPOST ON THE MISSOURI RIVER, TOLD WILLIAM BECKNELL OF THE SECRET MEETING-PLACE BELOW THE HEADWATERS OF THE ARKANSAS WHERE THE COMANCHES CAME TO BARTER CHEAPLY THE MULES THEY'D RAIDED FROM THE RICH HACIENDAS TO THE SOUTH.

MULES WERE HIGH THAT SUMMER OF 1821 AND BECKNELL, AN EXPERIENCED PLAINSMAN, SAW A NEAT PROFIT IF HE COULD FIND HIS WAY THERE AND AVOID THE SPANIARDS FROM OLD TAOS AND SANTA FÉ, WHO HATED AMERICANS.

THE LAST OF AUGUST, BECKNELL AND 16 OTHERS, EACH WITH A PACK HORSE LOADED WITH TRADE GOODS, SET OUT INTO THE 800 MILES OF UNKNOWN TO THE SOUTHWEST. CROSSING THE PRAIRIES TO THE ARKANSAS, THEY FOLLOWED IT INTO COLORADO AND STRUGGLED OVER THE MOUNTAINS THROUGH RATON PASS INTO NEW MEXICO WHERE THEY WANDERED ABOUT, UNABLE TO FIND THE MEETING PLACE, UNTIL SURPRISED BY A TROOP OF SPANISH CAVALRY.

BUT INSTEAD OF BEING HERDED OFF TO JAIL THEY WERE ESCORTED TO SANTA FÉ AND FETED ROYALLY, FOR MEXICO HAD JUST SECEDED FROM SPAIN AND THE NEW AUTHORITIES WERE ANXIOUS TO ESTABLISH TRADE RELATIONS. DISPOSING OF THEIR GOODS, THEY RETURNED WELL SUPPLIED WITH SILVER PESOS.





# "OLD WEST"

THE NEXT SPRING, WITH 21 COMPANIONS AND 3 COVERED WAGONS, BECKNELL STARTED AGAIN FOR SANTA FE. BUFFALO STAMPEDED THE HORSES. OSAGES CAPTURED 2 MEN, WHO WERE RESCUED BADLY MAULED.

LEAVING THE ARKANSAS BELOW THE PRESENT DODGE CITY, THE WAGONS ROLLED CUMBERSOMELY INTO A SHORT CUT OVER THE 80 MILES OF ARID WASTE TOWARD THE VALLEY OF THE CIMARRON. WATER RAN SHORT THE FIRST DAY AND THEY MADE A DRY CAMP. THE SECOND, THEIR WATER GAVE OUT. ALKALI DUST AND THE BLAZING SUN PLAGUED MEN AND ANIMALS. THE THIRD DAY THEY WERE IN BAD SHAPE, WHEN THEY FINALLY HIT THE CIMARRON-- ONLY TO FIND ITS BED NOTHING BUT SUN-BAKED SAND.



ON THEY TOILED, MADDENED BY THIRST AND MIRAGES, UNTIL SOMEONE SPOTTED A SOLITARY OLD BUFFALO BULL. THEY SHOT IT AND FOLLOWED ITS BACK TRAIL TO A WATERHOLE WHERE BECKNELL SUDDENLY REALIZED, AS HE SHOULD HAVE ALL ALONG, THAT THE RIVER WENT UNDERGROUND IN THE DRY SEASON. ALL HE HAD TO DO FOR WATER WAS TO DIG.

THEY CONTINUED UP THE CIMARRON TO ITS HEAD. THERE THEY TOOK THE WAGONS APART, CARRIED THEM UP THE PRECIPITOUS MOUNTAINS, REASSEMBLED THEM, CROSSED THE DIVIDE TO ROCK CREEK, REACHED THEIR GOAL IN MID-SUMMER, AND THE SANTA FE TRAIL TO THE SPANISH SETTLEMENTS AND CALIFORNIA HAD BEEN BROKEN AT LAST.

A PORTION OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL AS IT LOOKS TODAY.



# BLIND BULLET

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

A man came running at him,  
and he aimed straight and  
pulled. . . .



*Where justice was blind,  
Sheriff Hendry knew—his  
vengeful sixes weren't!*

SHERIFF Matt Hendry looked at the eyeglasses the doctor had pushed across the desk to him, and with a little smile around his wide mouth he picked them up. He fitted them on, glanced through his office window, and now there was a new sharpness and clarity to his vision. He could see the

liver-colored pup foraging the alley beside Abe Ganz's butcher shop, and he could see Roy Nash and Bud Clade seated on the bench in front of M'Keogh's saloon, with a bottle between them. They were both looking in Hendry's direction, toward the jail office, with unforgetting malice and sullen speculation.



Hendry brought his attention back to the doctor, and slowly removed the glasses. Without the correcting lenses, his vision instantly clouded, with all things seen as if through a diffusing screen of thin gauze. He pushed the glasses across his desk, shook his head.

"Too proud to wear them?" Doc Brownlee asked.

"You might put it that way, Harry." Hendry's smile was a small one, faintly curved by grave amusement. "A man never likes to admit he's getting old and beginning to unravel."

Irritation stirred Doctor Brownlee's round face. "Any man who refuses to admit it is just a plain fool," he said shortly.

"I suppose."

"You're nudging sixty, Matt. Too old to handle a job like yours in a town like this. You lost your speed with a gun a dozen years ago, and now your eyes have gone bad. How long do you expect to keep this up?"

Hendry looked up, mildly surprised. "Why, I don't know. I never gave it much thought."

"Then it's time you started, Matt. You built up a reputation when this town was first started, and it's carried you through long past your time. Don't depend on it any longer, Matt. Turn in your badge, and let a younger man take over this office."

Hendry looked across his desk to the doctor's troubled eyes. "Can you suggest anyone, Harry?"

"Carl Stacey."

Hendry shook his head. "Too much politician in Carl; he talks too much. He couldn't stand up to Charley Pharr or the Danvers brothers."

"Lee Shaddock, then."

A wintery discontent stirred in Hendry's eyes. "I've seen a lot of Lee Shaddocks in my time. They're too willing to use a gun. Give them a badge to wear, and

they're killers hired by the law. Like Hickock. I wouldn't want to see this county saddled with a man like Lee Shaddock."

Brownlee moved his shoulders impatiently. "That's your trouble, Matt. You've worn the badge so long that you can't see anybody else wearing it. You measure everyone else against your own record, and that's a mistake. We can find some other man good enough for this office."

"Easy to say, but maybe not so easy to do, Harry." Hendry glanced at the wall clock, and saw that half an hour remained before noon, the deadline he had given Bud Clade to be out of town. He stood up, restless and irritable from this waiting. He flexed his right arm, kneading that shoulder with his fingers, but the deep, dull bite of rheumatic pain remained in that joint, cramping it. That, he realized, was the danger in his refusal to turn in his badge. He had the will to carry on; he had the reputation, hard-earned in the early days of this town; but he no longer had the ability. He wasn't too obstinate to admit that, to himself if not anyone else. A man needed more than courage and the bluff of his reputation to keep law in a town like this one. He needed clear vision and smooth-working muscles, and those things he realized that he no longer possessed.

Doc Brownlee got out of his chair, and went to the window, peering across the street toward the two men on the saloon's frontwall bench.

"Come noon," he said, "what are you going to do if Bud Clade hasn't left town?"

"I'll go after him."

Brownlee did not turn away from the window. "If you take Clade, you'll bring the Danvers brothers down on you." He put his hands on the window sill, as though to support himself for a long vigil. "And Charley Pharr."

Hendry made no reply.

**B**BROWNLEE swung away from the window, and his voice, for the first time, was urgent. "Clade is pretty thick with the Danvers brothers and Charley Pharr. He's mean with a gun. What if Clade decides to fight?"

Hendry shrugged. A fight, or the prospect of one, was a thing to be considered at its time, but never anticipated. He said quietly, "Is Roy still over there with Clade?"

"You know damn well he is," Brownlee said shortly. He came around the desk and dropped again into his chair. He looked up at the sheriff, and his eyes were bitter. "Sure Roy Nash is still over there—priming Bud Clade to buck you when you go after him at noon."

Hendry's smile was thinly cheerless. "Clade doesn't need priming for any kind of trouble."

"He's getting it, just the same," Brownlee shot back. "Clade is getting the same kind of talk young Nash has spilled about you ever since you brought him back to this town. That you murdered his father, that you killed his mother, that you are too yellow to give him a chance to settle the score with a gun. How much more of that are you going to take from him, Matt?"

"Talk never hurt anyone."

"It's hurting you. It's tearing down everything it took you thirty years to build up. It's got the tough crowd so they're not afraid of you any more. It's got Bud Clade humped up to buck you, and it's got Charley Pharr and the Danvers ready to cut you down at the first excuse you give them. Don't try to tell me Nash's talk isn't hurting you, because it is. Let it go on, and it'll kill you."

Hendry glanced again at the wall clock, for a moment watching the rhythmic swinging of the pendulum. Then he turned and looked at the doctor, without expression.

"Remember Kathy Evarts, Doc?" Then he smiled and shook his head slowly.

"Sure, you remember her. You'd just come here from the East and tacked your shingle out over Miguel's saddle shop—thirty years ago next spring. Kathy didn't marry Monte Nash until after you got here, so you must have seen her around town. A pretty girl, small and slim and with a way of laughing—"

"I remember her. And I remember the gambler she married. It's a wonder he wasn't killed a long time before you got to him. Monte Nash was plain no good."

"Kathy loved him," Hendry said. He scooted his chair back and lowered his weight into it. "There must be some kind of balance between good and bad that we can't always see. It's hard to tell sometimes."

The ache was still punishing his shoulder, deeply and dully, and he wished it would go away. But he knew it wouldn't. The slug had been removed and the wound had healed months ago, but the damage had been done by the first impact of the bullet. The pain would forever be in him, some days worse than others, but it would always be there to cramp his shoulder and pinch the nerves of his right arm and remind him of that bitter day at the cabin on Dry Creek.

He said quietly, "I remember saying the same thing to Kathy that you just said—that Monte Nash was no good. It was after I killed him in that fight on Dry Creek, and I felt bad about it when I saw who he was, when I found Kathy in the cabin. She must have known her husband would be killed some day, and I asked her why she had ever married a man like him. You want to know what she told me?"

Brownlee's glance was dry, with the sheen of memory on it. "She said it was because she loved him."

Hendry nodded slowly. "That's what she said. She said another woman might understand what she had loved in Monte Nash, but that I wouldn't. What did she



mean by that, do you think, Harry?"

Brownlee moved his shoulders. He made no reply.

Hendry spread his big hands and looked at them. He said in a voice that was now almost harsh, "That's what hits me so hard, Harry. It hurts. Kathy never was a strong girl, but she let herself in for nearly thirty years of living Monte Nash's kind of life. They had money one day, and they were broke the next; they followed the border towns and she waited in smelly hotel rooms without knowing whether she would ever see him alive again. What kind of a life is that for a woman to live, Harry? What kind of a deal is that for a man to give a woman like Kathy?"

Brownlee shook his head. "No answer for that, Matt." He looked through the window toward the bench in front of the saloon, toward the two men seated on it; his mouth tightened and he shook his head again.

Hendry clenched his hands and slowly opened them. He spoke dully. "Monte hit a streak of bad luck, and that was why he tried to hold up the stage. Kathy was sick and Monte needed money for her; he couldn't get it gambling so he tried to get it with a gun. I didn't know who he was when I went after him. I tracked him to Dry Creek, and when I called to him he pulled a gun. That's when I shot him. I didn't know who he was until after he was dead."

Brownlee said bitterly, "With eyes like yours, you were lucky to hit him."

Hendry's eyes lowered until he was looking at his holstered gun. "You're never lucky to kill a man." He stared at the gun, at the worn butt plates and the shell cases glinting in the breech of the cylinder, as though he were afraid of this weapon and of what it had done and might yet do. "It's the wrong kind of luck, Harry."

He raised his eyes, looking at the doctor

but not seeing him. "I found Kathy inside the cabin that day, after the fight. She never was strong, even when she lived here, but she might have lived if she hadn't made me tell her about Monte. When she knew her husband was dead she didn't seem to want to live any longer. In a way, young Roy is right about me killing his mother."

Brownlee inclined his round head at the sheriff. "Her heart was worn out and she would have died anyhow. You stop thinking anything else but that, Matt."

"Maybe," Hendry said. "Maybe so."

"I'VE told Roy Nash that about his mother. I've told him you brought back a bullet in your shoulder after that fight, his father's bullet in you. He wouldn't listen to me." Brownlee made a bitter gesture with his hand, and his voice was sharply urgent. "Roy wouldn't listen to me because he's too much like his father. He's been honest until now, and he needs an excuse to go bad. He's making you his excuse, Matt. Damn it, man, open your eyes and see what he's doing to you! He's using you for his excuse to go bad; it's a quirk in his mind or maybe the honest blood Kathy gave him that's making him work it this way. He has to have a reason in his mind, some crazy kind of a justification, and that is why he's trying to force you to fight him."

Hendry's smile was thin and gray. "You can't blame him for hating me, can you?" He lowered his hand until his blunt fingers almost touched the floor; he raised his hand, flexing his arm slowly against the cramping ache. It was a thoughtless movement that did him no good and never would. "I promised Kathy I'd look after Roy. It's what I'm trying to do. It's why I won't let him make me fight him."

He looked around at the wall clock and saw the hand move over another space;

four minutes now until noon. He sat straighter in his chair, with the edges of his mouth sharpening and a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. He kept staring at the clock, at the hands drawing inevitably together at the apex of the dial.

"Clade still over there?"

"You know he is," Brownlee said.

"I didn't figure it would go this far. I figured Clade would get drunk or back down before the time came. I was wrong." It hit Hendry then, the full impact of what he was up against. He had been in a score of fights in his time, but always in the last minutes of waiting it struck him like this, with a swift and brutal shock of unreality, of dread, even of fear. He put his big hands on the desk top, flattened them with the increasing pressure of his arms until his knuckles whitened and tendons ridged under his skin. "What makes a man turn lobo?" His voice harshened against the room's unanswering silence. "Why do they, Harry?"

Brownlee watched him dismally, making no reply.

"Why do they?" Hendry repeated roughly. He shook his head violently. "Men like Clade are born honest, but something turns them crooked. I warned Clade to stop cheating at Coe Danvers' gambling tables. Why didn't he listen to me?"

Brownlee said darkly, "Roy Nash talked louder."

"When he kept on running crooked games, I warned him to get out of town. I gave him plenty of time, but he didn't take it. He must know I'll have to come after him now."

Brownlee's tone was bitter. "Sure he knows. But he thinks you're an old man gone yellow. Roy Nash fed him that idea. Now Clade will fight, and so will Pharr and the Danvers brothers."

Hendry got half out of his chair, with his weight planted hard against rigid arms. He stood like that, not a muscle moving

in his body, staring down at his hands. Then abruptly he shoved back from the desk and straightened, and some of the strain dropped away from him. He said, his voice relaxed again, "You never think about trouble until just before it comes, and then it hits you. It's like the kick of a mule, Harry."

"Sure," Brownlee said.

"You're all right after it passes over. But while it's on you, you want to run away someplace and hide. You always feel like that. You're all right if you can stick until that passes."

"I know."

Hendry pulled his hat from the wall peg, fitted it on.

Brownlee said urgently, "You wear those glasses, Matt. You put them on and keep them on until this is finished."

But Hendry slowly shook his head. "My best weapon is to keep them thinking I'm just as tough as I used to be." He shook his head again. "You keep out of this, Harry."

Brownlee cursed, thinly and harshly. "I can get together a dozen men who'll back you in this."

Hendry's mouth tightened. "It's my fight." He went to the door, opened it; he turned and looked at Brownlee and at the shotgun the doctor had dragged from the wall rack. He said definitely, "You keep out, Harry. I mean what I say. You stay out of this."

He closed the door carefully, swung away, and was then out on the street. Sunlight beat down on him, and the smell of hot dust came up from the street. From some corner of the town a horse whickered fretfully, and then was silent. Nothing moved as Hendry stood there, and all things watched. He saw the diffused angles of buildings near him, and as his glance drifted on the details became increasingly cloudy until the end of the street was lost in an impenetrable gray haze; and he thought narrowly, *I'll have*



*to get close to trouble to do any good.*

He brought his glance around to the indistinct pattern of M'Keogh's saloon and to the hazy shapes of the two men in front of it. They were standing now, Roy Nash and Bud Clade. They were watching him silently and waiting for him to make his move. He began walking toward them. He came to the center of the street, walking slowly and never hesitating. He saw Roy Nash, lean and tall and angular, step to one side with a short, contemptuous laugh.

"It's that yellow-backed sheriff."

HENDRY said nothing. He had known it would be this way with Roy. The boy blamed him for the death of his father and mother, and because Hendry refused to fight him he thought he was a coward.

The boy said biting, "What does it take to give me a chance at you, Hendry? I've cussed you, I've told this town how yellow you are. Why won't you see how far your bluffing will go against me, you old—"

Henry moved steadily on, looking only at Bud Clade. He heard the swinging creak of a door down the street, and knew that Charley Pharr and the Danvers brothers had come out to watch this. He didn't look toward them. He could see Clade fairly clearly now, but he knew Coe and Lige Danvers and Charley Pharr would be nothing more than vague shapes to him at this distance.

Still walking, he spoke his first words to Bud Clade; "I warned you to be out of town by noon, Clade. You're still here, and that's a bad mistake for you."

Now he could see the violence loose-leashed in Clade's eyes, the pinch of strain and the hard driving of hatred. The man's voice jumped out at him harshly, "Stay away from me, Hendry."

"You've got two choices left," Hendry said softly, "to go to jail or use your gun."

He kept moving in, slowly, unswervingly. "Which is it going to be, Clade?"

Roy Nash spoke contemptuously through the silence. "It's bluff, Clade! He's all yellow and all bluff."

Clade suddenly yelled, harshly. "Damn you, shut up, Nash!"

Relief traced thinly through Hendry then, and he knew this part was ended; a man with an unbending will to fight would have no room in him for words.

There was a wildness in Clade's shout that made it sing. "You can't drive me out of town, Hendry! You've got no right."

Hendry moved on, unhurriedly. He came close and nudged Clade's arm. "Come along, Clade."

Roy Nash sneered harshly, "Yellow-backed and all bluff!"

"Come along," Hendry said. He put his weight against Clade, and the man gave ground. He steered him around with the steady pressure of his hand, off the plank walks and out into the street, toward the jail. From behind him he heard, then, the swift lunge of Coe Danver's shout.

"You can't get away with this, Hendry. Turn him loose."

The town around Hendry grew suddenly hot and tight. He could feel, abruptly, the last of his time rapidly running out, like the final thread of his luck straining thinly and ready to snap. He moved steadily on, herding Clade ahead of him and trying to get the man to the jail before this broke. He couldn't do it. Danver's shout lashed at him, with violence and the lust to kill in it. "You and your high-handed ways are finished here, Hendry. I'm telling you, turn him loose."

A gun blasted back there. The bullet kicked a thin gout of dust up from the street at Hendry's feet, halting him. He looked at the track the bullet had made, and then he raised the focus of his eyes to the base of Bud Clade's left ear, and that was where he struck his blow. Clade went down slackly, and Hendry wheeled to-

ward the Special, where Coe and Lige Danvers and Charley Pharr stood. He started in that direction, walking heavily.

A voice—Charley Pharr's—laughed maliciously. "Hell, he's coming right over to get it."

Hendry began running toward those vague crouching shapes, hauling out his gun. There was a scurry of movement in front of the Special, of men fanning out to thin his target and whipsaw him, and a small, bitter smile grew on Hendry's mouth. A gun slammed at him, and he felt the sharp bite of the slug skinning his left thigh. He changed his direction sharply, and angled again, still driving toward them. His gun was up, but he couldn't pierce the diffusing haze with his eyes to locate a distinct target. A swift clatter of shots raked at him, and his left arm went limp. Shock drove him around, and he caught himself, still running, with his mouth open as though to scream or drag in air.

He singled out one man, ran at him, and loosed his bullet. He missed, and something tripped him, and he went down heavily. He lurched to his feet with a dull wonderment that he had escaped death this long. A man came running at him, and he aimed straight at the bulk and pulled. The man fell, but others were coming in on him—Lige Danvers and Charley Pharr. He could see them more clearly now, like men coming through smoke at him, shapes rushing at him as if through a thinning gray fog.

He saw the black spurt of Pharr's shot and felt himself flung around violently by the bullet. He brought up against the hitch rail, braced himself against it, angled his weapon and pulled. He heard the cry of pain, the gusty sigh of released air. He shot at Lige Danvers, pushed away from the rail, and stumbled out to meet the man's heavy rush. He felt the muzzle blast of Danver's shot, and somehow knew that the slug had missed him. They came to-

gether, crashed together, and he pushed his gun against Danver's body and jerked the trigger.

Hendry got up slowly from the street, knowing that he was going to be sick. He let the gun slide out of his fingers, and put his forearm hard across his stomach, holding it there. He saw the indistinct shape of Roy Nash still standing there near the corner of M'Keogh's, and turned toward the boy in a loose, shuffling walk. He halted after his third uncertain step. He could go no further.

He said, "I didn't know he was your father until after the fight that day. I didn't know it was him, Roy. My eyes—they're not so good any more, and I didn't recognize him." His words were slow and thick; he had to search for them, find them and drag each one to his lips. "I didn't know who he was until it was all over."

He found himself sagging, with one knee down on the street. He refused to stay there, and heaved himself up again.

"I promised your mother I'd watch after you. That's why I wouldn't fight you, boy. You see, I loved your mother once. I loved Kathy—"

A hand reached out and braced him. "You told me that."

Hendry tilted his face up, looking at Roy Nash. "It's what you've got to know. Why, thirty years ago I hoped—"

"I know."

Hendry wagged his head slowly. "I'm too old for a job like this. Brownlee told me, and he's right. It takes a younger man. You could do it, Roy. A young man like you could handle it."

Nash said, "We can talk about that later." But Hendry hadn't heard that. Nash looked at him, and then raised his eyes, clear now and untroubled, to Doctor Brownlee. "You fix him up, doc. Don't let anything happen to him."

Brownlee looked up at him, somewhat surprised, and then quickly nodded.



# Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 63)



1. False. An "iron tender" is the man who tends the branding irons at roundup time.

2. A "jacal" is any small hut or shack—particularly a run-down one.

3. A "shotgun messenger" used to be the individual who rode the top of a stagecoach along with the driver, for protection.

4. "Rawhide" is sometimes slangily termed "Mexican iron" by cowpunchers. Rawhide used to be used quite extensively by Mexican cowpunchers, and the stuff does wear like iron.

5. If the ranch boss told you to go out and fetch a "muley," you should return with a hornless cow.

6. If a cowpuncher told you he had "just mustard some cows," you should think that he meant he had just stirred up or excited some cattle.

7. According to the cowpuncher's way of thinking, "ringey" means "angry."

8. If a Western acquaintance told you the location of his favorite "roadhouse," you should report the matter to the sheriff. A "roadhouse," according to Western slang, is a temporary corral used by rustlers to pen up stolen cattle.

9. True. "Rusties" are wild cattle.

10. True. A "rowel" is the wheel of a spur.

11. False. A "set brand" is a brand which is put on with an iron which permits "stamping"—not an iron such as a running iron which requires that the brand be "drawn" on.

12. The term "seven-under-bit" implies a type of earmark.

13. "Skull cracker" is a cowpuncher term used in reference to an Indian tomahawk.

14. True. In the West, the term "skid grease" is sometimes applied to butter.

15. If the ranch boss sent you out to bring in a "soft horse," you should return with a horse that is in poor physical shape, and consequently tires easily.

16. False. In the language of the rangeland, a "sod-buster" is not a cowpuncher who has been thrown hard from a horse. Rather, a sod-buster is a farmer.

17. If a man is said to be "straight as a wagon tongue," then he is considered to be trustworthy and on-the-level.

18. True. "Stomach pump" is a term which the cowboy uses in reference to a certain type of bit.

19. False. The term, "swallow forking" means putting on one's best clothes.

20. The cowpuncher slang term, "to tail out" means to break camp or to leave.

# TAPS FOR A

*There's nothing like a redskin arrow  
to let the bad blood out of a shavetail  
—and nothing like one bullet left in  
his gun and one fast ride through a  
bushwhack hell to prove what's left!*

★

THE rifle report was faint, battered and distorted by the endless confusion of ridges and sharp, broken arroyos of the Nebraskan badlands, but it brought Lieutenant Benteen Cooley upright in his saddle. He sat motionless, rigid with listening, while the six troopers of his reconnoiter detail watched him expectantly.

Heat lay brassy-yellow against the brown, sparsely grassed hills, shimmering and seething so that vigilance was a constant, trying effort that reddened eyes and shortened tempers. But somewhere in the folded hills, Bull Nose was gathering war parties of Sioux and Cheyenne, banding them under his inspired leadership to widen a gap already hacked across the Oregon Trail and the supply lines to the western garrisons.

Echoes of the first shot had yet to die when there were two more, then a dozen; and then an uncounted crackling that ripped the hill country hush.

"Company A has contacted them," Benteen Cooley said curtly. "Let's go!"

Reaching to unsnap the Springfield from his belt swivel, he wheeled his horse. Troopers spurred along the shallow valley, raising plumes of fine sand-dust as they raced toward the increasing racket of rifle fire. Benteen Cooley wiped his face on the sleeve of his blue tunic and turned

a quick look at his men. Good men, his Third Platoon bunch, loyal and worthy as any of the entire Fourth Cavalry. Justifiably proud, officers and men alike.

A man bringing up the rear reined aside suddenly and went pounding up a small swale. Benteen Cooley sawed around, swearing volubly.

"Blast your cowardly soul, Spade Yent! Get back here before Bull Nose cuts you off!"

But the deserter only hunkered lower in his saddle and kept working his spurs. Cooley sent his own Third Platoon black mare surging after the man. A minute's run and the hills had engulfed them. Thick vegetation of a summer-dried lagoon brushed at his stirrups. Wind whispered against his hat brim.

"Get back, Yent!" he yelled again. "By Godfrey's Ghost, I'll see you—"

Spade Yent twisted suddenly, a Springfield raised in his arms. Cooley flung himself desperately to one side as the rifle muzzle bloomed flame. He felt the mount drop beneath him; the earth rose, smashed, and a soft sighing blackness flooded across him.

STARS were low and white-flamed when Benteen Cooley opened his eyes. He lay asprawl a broken wild plum thicket, flesh puckered with the

★ By AL STORM ★



# TENDERFOOT



cold wind that sucked down through the hills. For a long moment he lay motionless, listening, remembering what had happened.

There was no sound. Even the usual mockery of the coyotes was absent and he raised his head warily, peering across

*They charged, and at the last moment dismounted and clambered up about...*

the starlit swale toward the shadowy ring of hills. A shiver shook him, but more a convulsion due to physical chill than to any twinge of nerves.

Lieutenant Benteen Cooley was too hard-bodied; stern-minded a soldier for fear, a seasoned Indian fighter to whom the contingencies of campaigning were only elaborated classroom problems of tactics and command. That he was afoot, alone in the Sioux country, did not unduly alarm him. He took stock of himself, finding his sidearm still buckled in its holster. He had no broken bones, and he got to his feet resisting the pain of bruised flesh with hard control.

Company A had contacted the Sioux shortly after the noon break. Now it was night, late night, if he judged the stars correctly. In the intervening hours, Captain Allen would have pursued the Sioux for miles. He began moving faster as his muscles loosened. Chances for survival would be immeasurably bettered if he could trail and rejoin the Command before dawn.

The night stretched away, immense and hollow, and Benteen Cooley fought his impatience and the anger that brought Spade Yent's name again and again into his bitter swearing.

Some two dozen coyotes suddenly loped out of the far end of the valley, reluctantly crossing the skyline. Cooley stopped, frowning uneasily as he watched them. Coyotes don't pack in the summer unless drawn by carrion. A fallen horse, perhaps, or a gut-shot Sioux crawled away into the brush to die alone.

But the sight that greeted him shocked him motionless. Dead horses, Indian and cavalry alike, lay scattered across a flat disc of level ground. Troopers were ricked like cord-wood, their twisted, mutilated bodies stripped and outraged. To the far right where the hills pinched to a blunt high ridge, he saw a breastwork of dead horses, a breastwork formed, assaulted,

and overrun. Bays, sorrels, grays, blacks—hollows half-scooped and unfinished behind them. The story was plain, and Benteen Cooley's jaw blunted as he read the tragic sequel to Captain Allen's attempted stand.

While he stood, some variance of the night touched him and he dropped low, scuttling to the deep shadow of a side hill. A horseman had entered the far side of the valley. Cooley stared, making out the blue tunic and campaign hat of a cavalry trooper. He eased his revolver along his body, careful that no starlight reflection betray him. Victorious Sioux had a penchant for donning cavalryman uniforms—or was it Spade Yent? The horseman advanced farther into the valley and Cooley could detect his true cavalryman's seat in the saddle, could see the Springfield held at ready across the man's arm. It might be unwitting bait to a Sioux trap to draw in scattered survivors? Cooley held to his hiding, nerves tightening as the lone horseman ventured farther and farther into the valley.

THE hills behind the horseman were suddenly disgorging a cavalry column, four abreast, guidons fluttering, a full four or five companies. Relief loosened the tension gripping him and he rose to his feet, calling out. The advance scout twisted, rifle lifting. Cooley threw himself flat, calling out again.

Brevet-Major Buck Farnsworth was in command, and he listened implacably as Benteen Cooley told what he knew of the skirmish.

"But for Trooper Spade Yent deserting, I would have been with my platoon," Cooley finished. "I'm not thanking Yent for that. Someday, maybe, we'll meet again. When we do—"

Brevet-Major Buck Farnsworth's face was dark in the starlight as he leaned forward in his McClellan saddle.

"Trooper Spade Yent is with the supply



train, badly wounded, Lieutenant Cooley," the major said harshly. "He reached us with two arrows hanging in his back, but he had grit enough to stay in the saddle until he'd told us that Captain Allen was in trouble."

The major's words rattled in the night like a handful of buckshot in a tin bucket.

"He says you held your men back, that you were afraid to help Captain Allen!"

Cooley's jaw dropped. He stared at the irate major, at the grimly accusing silence of the officers siding the major.

"Yent's a blasted black liar!" Cooley snapped. "When I get—"

"You won't get!" Farnsworth said. "You are forbidden to talk with Spade Yent until this is settled. Somebody's lying, and he'll pay for it, believe me. But there will be no threats or browbeating from any officer under my command!"

Cooley stiffened with indignation. "I'm under arrest?" he challenged.

Brevet-Major Farnsworth scowled but made no answer. He spurred ahead to see for himself the carnage of the battlefield.

"Spade Yent is my brother and I know him for a brave man," a low voice cut at Cooley from the darkness. "And I had two friends out there with Cap'n Allen."

Cooley spun to face a tall, dark trooper with a sergeant-major's stripes.

"So?"

The sergeant didn't answer. He met Cooley's eye for a brief, promising moment and then turned back into the darkness. . . .

The stigma was attached. Benteen Cooley writhed under the contemptuous silence of the officers and men. Farnsworth called for a bivouac there in the valley while he considered his next moves. Bull Nose and his Sioux had withdrawn to the northwest, vanishing into the endless serations of the sterile brown hills.

"We ought to follow until we catch

him," Captain Jennings said as they grouped about Brevet-Major Buck Farnsworth. "Let Bull Nose get away with this, and every Indian west of the Missouri river will start following him."

"He's already gotten away with it," Benteen Cooley interposed, "but wiping out Captain Allen and a company of cavalry wasn't his goal. He's working to get at Primrose on the Platte. If we follow into those hills, he'll double back and wipe the town off the map. That'll set our base of operations clear back to Fort Kearny. We can't afford to take the risk."

A dead silence followed his words. No man looked at him, none spoke.

"The lieutenant doesn't like risks," a voice mocked from the shadows.

Benteen Cooley turned on his heel and walked away. Behind him, he heard the low voices take up again, working away at the problem of re-opening supply lines on the west, at the same time giving protection to the little trade town of Primrose. His experienced advice was ignored, left unheeded as though unspoken.

Far to the west a wolf howled. Horses stamped and fidgeted restlessly. Men talked in low murmurs, pointedly falling silent as he approached, taking up again when he had passed.

It was a new role, being an outcast, a role Benteen Cooley found hard to manage. He stood staring bitter-eyed into the darkness. Spade Yent had deserted; Spade Yent had lied; and now Spade Yent was acclaimed hero while he himself was held in contemptuous disdain by the greenest rookie in the field.

He could guess what had happened. Spade Yent hadn't been able to evade Bull Nose's scouts and had had to run for it, taking an arrow or two in the process. He had headed for the only safety he knew, Brevet-Major Buck Farnsworth's column. Naturally the man hadn't admitted to being a deserter and so had

concocted his tale of riding for aid. The rest, the stigma he attached to Lieutenant Benteen Cooley, had been a purely precautionary measure, beclouding the issue and making questionable any testimony the Lieutenant might give should an investigation be made.

Cooley turned as a low whisper caught his attention. A shower of fresh horse droppings pelted him. For an instant his temper flared and he took a running step toward shadows that scampered and fled. He stopped, wiping filth from his tunic. The mocking chuckle he recognized and he looked up sharply.

"This your doing, Sergeant Yent?"

Yent shrugged his big shoulders, not answering; and his insolence was in itself answer. Cooley knotted his fists. Knowing the way of the army, he began unbuttoning his tunic. Sergeant Yent stared, then grinned widely and reached a hairy hand for his own tunic buttons.

Sergeant Yent was a solid man, his thick-muscled body hard as iron from long years of rigorous army life. Cooley could sense the bitter hatred driving the man, the pride that rebelled against any man's saying that a Yent had turned coward or attempted to desert. He would prove a ruthless antagonist.

"You can still back out," Yent taunted. "A man sometimes likes to choose his fights—"

"Like your brother, Sergeant?" Cooley goaded the man. "And lie a little when he gets caught running?"

The taunt scathed the man as Cooley had known it would. Yent lowered his chin into the hollow of his collar bone and waded in, big fists churning. Benteen Cooley set himself and laced his own right into the thick of Yent's middle. But the Sergeant blocked the blow, dancing aside and cuffing Cooley twice before he could follow through.

The sergeant wasn't unschooled or inexperienced. He jabbed out savagely and

his fist caught Cooley in the mouth, smashing his lips against his teeth. Cooley's own fists scored on the side of Yent's head, shaking him; and Yent drove on through with a blow that sent Cooley reeling backward, gasping for air, his ribs numbed by shock.

A MAN called suddenly from the shadows, and they went at it hammer and tongs, knowing that attention was drawn and that the fight would be stopped unless one of them won out quickly. They stood toe to toe, slugging the resentments distilled in their systems, working their antagonisms into a punishing sledging of knotted fists. Troopers slowly ringed them, hissing their breaths as one or the other reeled away from a smashing blow.

Benteen Cooley sobbed for breath, the acrid taste of blood and dust thick on his lips. Yent came lunging in, seeming inexhaustible, and the lieutenant leaned into the attack, working both fists in a last desperate expenditure of energy. Yent's boot slipped and he staggered. Both blows hooked him, rocking him back. His big fists sagged. Cooley sent over a hard right, all the fight left in him behind that one blow. Yent dropped woodenly.

"Captain Ames!" a hoarse, stentorian voice bawled. "Arrest that man immediately!"

Troopers froze as Brevet-Major Buck Farnsworth and Captain Ames pushed forward. The major bent over Yent, rolling him onto his back and peering closely at the battered features.

"So," he said. "It's Sergeant Yent now." He wheeled suddenly and his voice reached to the far ends of the valley. "I want a detail of four men placed as guards around Trooper Spade Yent until he is on his feet. Lieutenant Cooley is not to be allowed near him, even if they have to shoot to keep him away."

The fight had proved nothing. With



dawn, Sergeant-Major Yent was up and around, his swollen eyes cold and brooding as he watched Benteen Cooley. Burial details were called out and the sad, lonesome task of interment began. Brevet-Major Farnsworth scowled bleakly as he studied the hillcrests.

"Sir—" Benteen Cooley began once; but the major's expression stopped him short.

For three days they bivouaced, scouts ranging the hills for sign of Bull Nose and his Sioux. The mule train came up and joined the company. Cooley saw Spade Yent talking to his brother, arguing, waving his one good arm. Spade Yent's other arm was in a sling, his whole upper torso wound with gauze bandage. Cooley tried to catch his eye, but Spade Yent would not face him. All of this proved nothing, and Benteen Cooley grew sullen and short-tempered.

He quartered alone now, morose and bitter.

"Go over the hill," Sergeant Yent advised contemptuously. "The army is a poor place for a quitter."

Cooley started for the man, then stopped. Yent wanted another fight,

wanted to prove to himself that he was the better man. But Cooley knew that another fight would forever ruin his commission. He ignored the sergeant's twisted grin. Troopers were listening, watching, and he saw Sergeant Yent's coarse wink as he turned away.

On the third day a lone horseman came riding in from the south, horse foam-flecked and weaving with fatigue. Men shouted, a bugle whimpered expectantly as some bugler breathed experimentally into the mouth piece. Excitement caught the camp and spread widely as men watched the approaching rider.

"Bull Nose," the civilian said. "He's behind you—burned Ed Forest's place and killed every one of Ed's family. We've rounded up everybody we could and hustled 'em into Primrose, but we can't hold out if'n them Sioux hit us direct."

A flat grin touched Cooley's lips as he listened. This was vindication of his judgment, but more—it was opportunity to prove himself. Major Farnsworth glanced at him and saw the grin. His features hardened.

"This makes you happy, Lieutenant Cooley?"



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Cooley stiffened. "I'm glad of the chance to take the field against Bull Nose," he said softly. "It's a long score I've got to settle with that redskin."

Major Farnsworth turned away. A bugle sent sharp imprecations cutting through the somnolence of the sun-drenched valley. Speed took over, a hurried, practiced pace of routine that had the flank guards called in, the camp broken, the whole force mounted and on the move in a matter of minutes.

Sergeant-Major Yent rode close to Major Buck Farnsworth, his face impassive and dark with an unshaven bristle of beard.

Cooley heard him say, "Lieutenant Furness is still down with dysentery. Would the major consider putting Lieutenant Cooley over Fourth Platoon, Company C?"

The major turned to stare at the sergeant, and Cooley stared, equally nonplussed. His shoulders tingled and he gripped his saber hilt. A bullet in his spine; who could say when or how it came about in the mad melee of Indian battle. Major Buck Farnsworth was considering that angle, too, and he looked from Yent to Cooley, calculating his needs. A commissioned man was needed, and Benteen Cooley was unattached. The matter of the arrest could be waived. But to put him in front of Sergeant Yent's Fourth Platoon—

"I'd like the chance, sir," Cooley said.

The thing was done. Sergeant Yent rode off with open triumph showing deep in his murky black eyes.

"Watch your back, Lieutenant," Buck Farnsworth said gruffly. "Yent is the best man we have, but he's still blood-brother to—"

Benteen Cooley nodded.

"Trooper Spade Yent was transferred to Fourth Platoon, Company C this morning," Major Farnsworth finished.

Cooley felt a chill settle across his shoul-

ders. He nodded non-committally. Two Yents, both hating him, and both riding behind him toward an Indian skirmish.

Buck Farnsworth set a stiff pace. The column stretched out in a fast gallop that raised a high shimmering dust pointer telling all the world just where they were. Days and nights snapped past, darkness and light merging and breaking, growing heated and chilled by turns as they drove ahead, snatching sleep in the saddle or throwing themselves doggedly down whenever Farnsworth gave a break.

But they made time. The hills grew sharper and rougher as they neared the flat, flowing Platte, Benteen Cooley and Sergeant Yent rode side by side, the silence between them an abyss that not even the nearing battle could bridge. Trooper Spade Yent held to himself, keeping clear of lieutenant and sergeant alike; but watching him, Cooley was able to detect the stiffness and high tension building in the man. He smiled grimly.

**B**REVET-MAJOR Buck Farnsworth briefed them with his plan that night.

"We'll separate into three columns, Company C left, Dog right," he said. "I know it's dangerous to divide in face of unknown numbers but I can't risk losing Bull Nose now. Whoever contacts him will give way and lead him across the center column. Should center hit him first, the two flanks will curl an and pinch him off." The major pinched his thumb and forefinger together, snapping a sage twig with a dry crack.

They fanned out, putting miles between them as they verged toward the river town of Primrose. Captain Ames of C Company duplicated the setup, sending First and Fourth Platoons on flank while Second and Third held the center. Cooley saw the captain watching him and he waited, knowing the doubt that lay in Captain Ames's mind; but the captain



said nothing. Cooley rejoined his platoon and they ranged out. Sergeant Yent frowned darkly.

"Bull Nose wiped out a full company back there," he said bleakly. "What'll a platoon do?"

Benteen Cooley didn't answer. The question was too darkly etched in his own mind. If then should they meet the full force of Bull Nose's savages, just what would they do?

The sun rose crimson red, and then paled to a fiery white ball that seemed to melt the very heavens. Sand flies lifted and tormented horses and men alike. It was very still; only the cllop of hooves, the clink and tinkle of chains and gear broke the breathless hush of expectancy.

"I don't like it, sir," Sergeant Yent said suddenly. "It ain't—"

Benteen Cooley stopped him with a touch of his fingers. The Indian was gone almost as quickly as he had appeared, and then thirty or forty Sioux raced their horses across a narrow opening ahead.

"Decoys," Cooley unconsciously whispered aloud. "That means a force up ahead." He turned to Sergeant Yent. "Get that heliograph working."

A second bunch of Sioux whipped from a clay-banked draw, yelling and waving, ferocious in their painted fury. They whirled and cavorted, discharging rifles and arrows into the cavalry, and then they were gone.

The country was chopped, a series of small water-washed draws and steep clay bluffs. From every draw, handfuls of redskins hurled against the platoon, smashing through in a confusion of yelling and shooting, and were gone again into the maze of broken country.

"Keep bunched!" Cooley yelled. "Give them volley fire when they get near enough. And for God's sake, don't dismount."

Sniping fire began eating into them from the clay banks. Horses reared and screamed and went down kicking. A trooper swore raggedly, then choked on his own blood and was dead before he hit the sand.

"Gallop!" Cooley yelled. "We can't stay here."

He led the way, driving from draw to draw in an ever-growing hail of rifle fire. Indians came at them from either side, chopping through the strung-out platoon, wheeling away into the twisted labyrinth



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of gullies only to reappear farther along. And then they faced a blunt square-topped uplift of eroded clay and sand. Grass fringed its crest, dotted with Indians firing down into the hapless platoon.

"Clean that ridge," Cooley directed.  
● "We've got to hole up."

Sergeant Yent's face was black with burned powder, rivuleted with sweat. His glance touched the steep clay banks of the knob, saw the Indians thick as the grass along its top. He nodded, and Benteen Cooley for the first time saw the black blood that sopped the man's side.

They charged, yelling and swearing, driving a rain of lead along the grass line as they spurred their horses at the steep bank. At the last faltering moment, they dismounted and clambered upward afoot.

Benteen Cooley evaded a rifle barrel jabbed at his face and grabbed the hot steel with his left hand. A quick jerk half lifted the redskin, and his saber cut a wedge between neck and shoulder. And then he was on top, hacking and jabbing, raised up in hand-to-hand fighting which stopped the Indians below from firing. In a moment's interval, he saw that more and more Sioux were ringing the knob, leaving their horses and clambering up the steep clay slopes. He was grabbed, half whirled, and lifted high. He jabbed his elbow backward into his assailant's ribs, kicked his blunt spurs into the bare legs. Respite gained, he twisted, smashing the hilt of his saber into the wide panting mouth of the Indian. The man sagged back and Cooley stepped in with a hard slash of the saber.

Seventeen men were left when the knob was cleared. Lacking time for rifle work, they tossed the dead and wounded Sioux over the rim, smashing down those Indians clinging to the almost sheer walls. And then it was rifle work, fast and deadly, until the threat was momentarily abated.

Heliograph flashes were winking to the south. Cooley caught the message.

"Ames has contacted Major Farnsworth," he laughed grimly. "We're to give way and lead them into the trap. What say, Sergeant? Shall we go down again?"

Sergeant Yent eyed the laughing, flint-eyed lieutenant. His eyes took in the bloodied uniform, then flicked to the other bloodied uniforms on the knob, the dragging lambs, the glassy eyes of those doomed men who had fallen.

Rifle fire crackled raggedly before the sergeant could find an answer. Sioux Indians poured at the knob, whipping their horses up the banks until they toppled.

The assault was repulsed, and they breathed again. Cooley was surprised to note the westerly drop of the sun. Sergeant Yent saw his surprise.

"A man might sneak through, come dark," the Sergeant observed. "It's a long chance, but help can't be too far away. Only, with night, they ain't apt to find us up here and we ain't got cartridges enough to keep firing to guide them."

Benteen Cooley didn't answer. Sergeant Yent was working deviously at something in his own way, otherwise Yent wouldn't have raised his voice to such a pitch.

"It's a long chance, but a brave man might make it," Sergeant Yent said. He turned. "Spade, you try it. You can slide down the west side there and—"

"No!" The refusal was almost a scream, the high ragged screech of breaking nerves. "I can't—"

Sergeant Yent said nothing. He stared from his brother to the watching lieutenant, then back to his brother.

"Sorry, Lieutenant."

He walked over and suddenly slapped Trooper Spade Yent across the face.

"I'll go myself, come dark."

Benteen Cooley stopped him. He held out his hand.

"Keep 'em shooting, sir," Sergeant Yent said. "I'll have help here by morning."





# **WESTERN WARNING**

*The gal that weds a cowboy  
Might as well get set to learn  
To sit and wait with patience  
For a husband's late return,*

*For men who work with cattle  
Never quit by clock or sun—  
And a gal who can't wait supper  
Hadn't better marry one!*



**By RAY P. SHOTWELL**

# WAGONS WEST

*"We've got three ways to judge a man, stranger. Some are fast in a fight—some are fast on their feet—others are first in boothill!"*



He heard the bellowing roar of Gutman's gun. . . .

By **TALMAGE POWELL**

**B**Y THE middle of the hot afternoon, the wagon train was drawing nearer to the ragged line of the mountains. Scott Jamieson drew rein and turned back toward the lead wagon. The train stretched toward the horizon in his gaze, like a dusty white snake crawling

over the lava ash land. Oxen bawled and babies cried, but beneath the usual laborious creakings and sighings of the train there lay a silence. Men weren't hollering and whooping it up. Scott could sense the rising tide of anger and fear as he neared the train.



Scott let his gaze drift. The land behind the wagon train was flat and sere and devoid of living things under the dead blue sky. Still ahead were the forbidding mountains, a wilderness of desolation, gaunt, rearing like vast angry things the earth had vomited up. Scott figured the train could take the mountains in its stride. There was water, and to spare. There were spare wheels and plenty of draft animals. The train hadn't been plagued with too much sickness, and except for Larry Dademan, back in the twenty-seventh wagon, who'd broken a leg, every man in the train was reasonably able-bodied. The train had something like two thousand miles behind it, and only a few more to go. Once through Thunder Pass, they would enter a new earth, an earth verdant and rich and ready to give its goodness to cattle and men alike. Scott Jamieson had brought the train over the vastness of the prairies from Abilene, having taken it over there from the other professional guide. But now Scott knew it was in for trouble; bad trouble, Indian trouble. He was worried to the point where he felt a little sick deep in his stomach.

Worry was unusual for him. He had lived on the plains too long for that. A towering, gaunt man with bone to spare in his shoulders and chest, he sat his Spanish saddle with ease in his buckskins. His worry grew of mystification, and he was mystified because he didn't know the reason behind the brewing trouble. He didn't like that feeling that was growing in the train, either. He liked open spaces and obstacles he could put his hands on and fight. He had never felt close to most of the people in the train. They came from solid cabins, from hearthstones where they had grown roots. They were going to a place where they would grow roots again, taking the habiliments of domesticity with them—spinning wheels, churns, needles, and rocking chairs. They

came from one world, Scott Jamieson from another. They obeyed his orders with a certain quiet tolerance, but with a reserve that showed they resented the fact of having to depend on him to get them across the wilderness. He decided he could handle them if worst came to worst, but this spoor of trouble from Running Elk—of that Scott Jamieson wasn't so sure.

Scott passed the lead wagon. It was hard traveling through this country. Not a hard pull nor a treacherous trail, but the wagons churned a long billow of dust across the plain. The oxen were tired. The heat dried the bones and pasted a man's tongue to the roof of his mouth. It was not a time for fear to spread over a train like sullen wings.

Down about the fourth wagon a knot of men was riding together. Scott felt the corners of his mouth twitch, looking at their faces. They had talked together while he was gone; maybe this would be a showdown.

Rafe Scoman, tall and old in the saddle, said, "Mister Jamieson!"

Scott wheeled his bay, rode straight toward the group of men. He looked at the faces and recognized the leaders of the train, the old, reserved ones. Scoman was a planter; Marovia on the chestnut was a smithy; Drake was a quiet, lean man with a serious face, a carpenter who led hymn singing about the campfire. Then Scott saw Shep Gutman in the cloud of dust from the ponies' hoofs. Gutman was big-chested with black hair growing over the backs of his hands. A smirk of triumph was in his eyes as he regarded Jamieson, and Jamieson knew that this gross man had been talking out of turn again. Shep Gutman didn't belong with the train. He had wandered into it five days back. The kindly, trusting folk of the train had taken him in. In some ways they were like sheep, Jamieson had decided, home-loving people who were simple, who didn't un-

derstand treachery because they were strangers to it in their own hearts. Gutman had made himself liked. Jamieson had had to tolerate him or lose the confidence of the train.

Jamieson hadn't liked it from the moment Gutman had drifted into the train. He suspected things about the man, intangible things for which he had no real basis—except knowing this country and its men. By the evening of the first day Gutman had started making suggestions. He knew this country, he said, implying that he knew it far better than the guide the train had hired in Abilene. By the third day Gutman had made Jamieson seem almost unnecessary. He developed a sort of following from some of the men, playing on their particular gripes. Any man in a two-thousand-mile journey is bound to build up gripes, and out of boredom will voice them. Jamieson had a cold, abrupt way of doing things that some of the men resented. He'd been sorry for that, but it was just his way of getting things done. And he'd felt a slow rising tide of wrath as he saw Gutman play on the peevishness the men harbored against him. It spelled trouble, Scott had known, but he'd found no way to get rid of Gutman without having the men think it was due to Gutman's knowledge and competence in this country.

JAMIESON drew rein beside Rafe Scoman's horse, and the gnarled old planter said, "Mister Jamieson, did you find a sign?"

"I'm afraid I did."

The men glanced at each other quickly. A wagon creaked by, driven by a sun-bonneted woman who was letting her man sleep.

Scoman hawked and spat toward the earth and held his pawing horse steady, his knuckles white on the reins. "Mister Jamieson, when you took this train, you told us you were Running Elk's friend.

You promised us that you would guide our women and children safely through Indian country!"

"And I will!"

"Haw!" Shep Gutman said, "I reckon them smoke spots we been seein' today is just from fires where Running Elk's braves are roastin' jackrabbits!"

The group of men was getting bigger; several nodded at Gutman's words. Scoman said, "Mister Jamieson, do you deny that those signals were war signals?"

"No, I'm telling you they were war signals!" Scott felt like being sharp, abrupt, knocking some sense in these good people's heads.

"Well, what are you reckonin' on doin' about it?" Gutman said. "Just lettin' these wagons go on toward Thunder Pass where Injuns will bottle 'em up and kill every livin' soul?"

Scott felt fear spread like a blanket with Gutman's words. "Mister Gutman, I'd advise you to keep your mouth shut!"

"And if'n I don't, I reckon you'll gun me down? I ain't armed. It might be an opportunity for you!"

Scott felt his face go scarlet. He wheeled the bay as if he would slash at the dark, leering face with the ham of his palm. But he caught himself in time. Gutman was trying to make him look like a hothead in front of these people.

Gutman laughed in the silence and reared up big in the saddle. "Gents, I happen to know this country about as well as anybody. You're headin' for Thunder Pass—and doom! My advice is to turn south and take over the mountains through Naked Slash. It'll be four days added on the journey, but a lot safer. And the land down there is just as rich, just as prime, and just as free as the land beyond Thunder Pass! Why should you be so het-set on Thunder Pass anyhow? You decided on it nearly three thousand miles away. Ain't no harm in changing your minds to something better,



is there? Take Naked Slash and the land beyond it, I say, and come out better all the way around!"

"There might be something in what you say," Scoman said. Several eyes rose from the gathering of men.

Scott looked at Gutman and thought, "I can't figure his game. I should have run him out of camp the first night—even if it took gunplay to do it!" He swiveled his gaze back to Scoman. He had half a mind to ask Scoman point-blank who was ramrodding this train, but he was a little afraid at the moment of Scoman's answer. He said, abruptly, "We're making camp now, Scoman. Send word ahead to the lead wagon. We're going to camp tongue to tongue and hub to hub!"

He turned the bay and started down the train. Behind him, he heard Shep Gutman say, "You heard that, gents! He wants you in formation for war! I say Naked Slash—"

Scott Jamieson wanted suddenly to see Evie Blane, to let the cool sound of her voice flow over the fires burning high in his throat that choked him. With a start, he realized that in this moment he needed her. It was a strange and new sensation to him. He'd never needed anyone before; the spaces, the solitude of a great new land, the excitement of its growing towns had been enough for him.

He realized that he had been thinking of her more and more as the train had threaded westward. She had called up something in him that had caused him, unwillingly, to compare his past life with what life might be like in the future. He had told himself that he wasn't for her. She came of a clean, scrubbed cabin. She was hearthstone and home, things that tied a man down. Things that Scott Jamieson had joked about but never considered for himself. Let somebody else break the land and run the cattle. It took all kinds to make a country. A woman tied a man down. You got tangled in

apron strings, and you weren't yourself any more; it took you and the woman both to make a new being when you got in the apron strings that way. And they were always waiting to trap you, to take your freedom, to expect you to talk when you wanted to remain silent. Scott had always regarded the business of marriage with something akin to horror, but somehow it was different with Evie Blane.

Yet he hadn't told her. They were too different. He had asked himself if there could really be anything for them, and every time the answer had come up negative. Sandy Calhoun was better for her. Sandy was tall and lean and wiry-young in his homespuns. He was a fuzz-whiskered lad with a steady eye and a level way of looking at a man that Scott liked. Calhoun wanted nothing more than the hearthstone, and he never wanted to wander, once he settled down, further than the apron strings would stretch. He would never let pain or grief or hardship come to a woman in his keeping. Scott had read all that in the younger man's face. He had read it too between the lines of Calhoun's talk. He knew that Calhoun was aware of his feelings for Evie, and much as he liked Calhoun, Jamieson knew that if he spoke for Evie and she assented, he would have to make the wound quick and clean in Calhoun, for Jamieson knew how much Calhoun loved the girl. It was in the fuzz-faced youngster's every action, in the way he watched over her campfire and kept it up and put a fire on her wagon wheel and brought her hot coffee when the lancing, bitter rains came down.

Oxen, wagons, mules, horses, and cattle streamed by Jamieson as he rode back along the train through the thick dust. In moments now Scoman should be sending a rider back along the line with word that they were making camp, letting each wagon know to keep pressure from piling up. Jamieson felt a tightness creep down

the small of his back as he considered the possibility of Scoman's ignoring his order. He was still boss of this train, Scott decided. He had to see it through. With war smoke like evil blossoms rising in the hot, dead sky he couldn't afford to let the train break into two segments, one going toward Naked Slash. That would be playing in Running Elk's hand—whatever had come over the Indian.

Far back down the line, cutting abrupt answers to questions flung at him as he passed, Scott brought the bay up beside the Blane wagon. Evie was driving, her pa heading the oxen, a furled bullwhip in his hand. The old man nodded to Scott. "Looking like trouble."

"Afraid so," Scott said, and the old man spat on the earth and hunched his shoulders a little deeper in the denim of his shirt.

Scott swung up on the seat beside the girl, holding the bay's reins. She was small, but lithe, with a sheen of auburn hair cascading down to her shoulders. A damp strand of it lay on her forehead, and Scott looked at her and thought once again how creamy her skin looked. And he imagined how her eyes would be in fireplace glow in a long prairie night.

Now she was looking toward the nearing mountains. She said, simply, "I'm scared."

"I am too," Scott admitted.

"But not for yourself."

He shrugged.

"You'd never be scared for yourself," she said. She brushed the back of her hand over her forehead. "I'm scared because something has gone out of us, Scott. When we started we were so confident and glad. Nothing seemed too great to overcome. Even when we crossed the rivers and had to sleep in wet blankets during the rains it wasn't hardship. We could have taken anything in stride. But it's different now."

"We haven't got much further to go."

"That's what makes it so bad. To think of people dying away out here, so far from the land they left—Scott, I can't even remember what it was like in Tennessee!"

"Don't try."

"Gutman was up and down the train talking while you were gone today, Scott. He wants the people to turn south and take up the land beyond Naked Slash."

"And what are the people saying?"

"Gutman has turned a lot of heads."

Scott didn't know how to answer that. He felt a wave of futile desperation. He wanted to fight something he could put his hands on. Gutman's sly, insidious treachery called for statesmanship, and Scott Jamieson wasn't sure he had it. Neither did he have the answer to Running Elk's behavior.

Evie looked out over the oxen's heads and said without rancor, "I'm sorry the Indian has forgotten his friendship for you, Scott."

"He's not that kind of Indian. I don't care what Gutman says. I don't care what appearances say. I know Running Elk, have known him for a long time. He's square. Maybe I can find out the answer."

He pulled the bay with the reins up alongside the creaking hub and swung into the saddle. He found Sandy Calhoun driving Larry Dademan's wagon. He reined in close. "How's Dademan's leg today, Calhoun?"

"Tol'able. When are we gettin' Injun trouble?"

"Maybe we won't."

"We could try Gutman's way."

"I was hoping I wouldn't hear that from you, Calhoun."

"I ain't sayin' I'm for it. I'm just sayin' we could try it. Some as wants to, some as don't. Mister, I don't exactly admire your lack of sentiment in dealing with people," Calhoun's jaw muscles rippled, "and the one person you show sentiment



for—I don't exactly admire that, either. But you contracted to get this train through. I said I'd go with you. Now hold up your end of the bargain, Mister Jamieson, and you'll find I'm not a man to welch on mine!"

"Calhoun," Jamieson said abruptly, realizing he was about to say something he had never voiced before, "if I persuade Evie Blane to marry me, I'll know I've won from a mighty good man."

Calhoun's eyes flashed; he turned crimson, half rising in the seat. "You ask her to marry you," he blurted, "and I'll know I've won from a mighty dead one!"

Something shimmered between the two men. Calhoun realized where his young impetuosity had led him, what he had said. He trembled faintly about the lips and a pulse hammered in the hollow of his throat, but he stood his ground, trying to stare Jamieson down.

Suddenly, Jamieson threw back his head and laughed, loud and hard in genuine appreciation. It disconcerted Calhoun and the youth glared at the oxen's swaying rumps.

"Calhoun, I'm appointing you to take charge of this train in my absence and stand between the people and Gutman. If events prove Gutman honest and right, we'll turn over this train to him with apologies and salary for seeing it through Naked Slash. But those events haven't happened yet; this train is still mine."

"And where might you be going?"

"To see an Indian about a war that appears likely to happen quick!" Jamieson wheeled the bay, knowing Calhoun was staring after him as if Calhoun considered him a fool.

THE glaring sun had slipped toward the horizon in the west. Night was creeping in from the east on hot, short tongues of breeze. Scott Jamieson gave the bay its head as he started down the rocky trail. He looked over his

shoulder at the painted brave riding behind him. The brave's countenance was as grim and stony as the landscape into which Scott had plunged when he'd left the train. Scott felt a faint fluttering of wings in his stomach. He had known that Running Elk's scouts would spot him. He had ridden into the foothills with a white rag on his carbine barrel. He had watched the signals mushroom from the neighboring hills, and had spotted the brave. Approaching, he had endured the agony of wondering if Indian blood was already past the boiling point. The Indian had accepted the sign of the white flag, at least momentarily, and now Jamieson, under guard, was nearing Running Elk's camp.

They rounded the breast of the mountain, came out on a spanning mesa, and there was the Indian war camp. Smoke spiraled from fires. Indian ponies whinnied. Squaws glanced up from their work as Scott and the brave passed, and other painted braves fell in beside them, until Scott was at a central point in a swarm of nearly naked brown men.

The group moved toward the center of the camp, parted, and Weewahitchka came through the lane of men. Weewahitchka was afoot, walking between mounted men, but men on horseback did not dwarf him. The medicine man was massive and fierce like the unbending hot stones of the desert that have turned brown in the heat.

"Peace, brother!" Jamieson said. "I come willingly to see my friend Running Elk."

Weewahitchka looked at him stonily, turned, and led the way toward the chief's tent.

A rifle barrel in the hands of a brave prodded Scott from the saddle. As he slid to the ground, the tent flap opened, and Running Elk was facing him. Scott had never looked upon the Indian without admiration. Running Elk was a sleek,

magnificent animal, his skin as smooth as a coat of sealskin, his eyes in deep, sunken sockets.

In the silence, Scott heard the shuffle of a bare foot, the distant pound as a squaw hammered in a mortar somewhere in the camp.

"Peace, Running Elk."

"Why you come, Jamieson?"

"To save much bloodshed. I see your signals. My train is coming through. I cannot understand, for I am your friend."

"Running Elk is through with friends! Running Elk knows no friends in the white tribes!"

There was a restless shuffle about Scott. He looked from face to face, his gaze arrested by the light in Weewahitchka's eyes. The medicine man was hunched in his cougar skin, his eyes needling light under his hood made of an eagle's head and wings.

Jamieson swallowed. "But I am still your friend, Running Elk, and where there is friendship differences can be settled. Why do you make the medicine of war?"

"The spirit of my son cries out! Running Elk must make war!"

A mutter ran through the group; Weewahitchka nodded his head with a jerk and began droning an imprecation to strange gods.

Jamieson felt beads of sweat needling his forehead. "Your son was well when last I saw him. What happened to him? How did he die?"

"By the white one's hand! By the hand of the man called Gutman!" Running Elk's arm described a sweeping gesture, ending with his fist plunging toward his chest. "I have treaty. I have always honored treaty, but the one called Gutman has taken Running Elk's lands at Naked Slash. Gutman and the new agent from the great white chief have done it—and they did it through the murder of my son."

Jamieson saw the light with a jolt. The treaty with Running Elk contained a clause revoking it in event of Indian trouble. The new land agent must be as crooked as Shep Gutman. Together they had provoked the son of Running Elk into a fight, killed him, and used it as a pretext to seize the lands in the Naked Slash country.

"My hatred of Gutman is a brother to the hatred Running Elk feels," Jamieson said. "The great white chief will learn of the agent's treachery. The great white chief will make it right to Running Elk. I give you my word."

"The great white chief is far away. Gutman is in your train. All in your train are friends of Gutman. Running Elk must make war. If people of train are Gutman's friends, they are my enemies. They come to do me harm. I destroy Gutman and all like him."

"Then soldiers will come, Running Elk. You are playing into Gutman's hands. In the end, the soldiers will destroy Running Elk."

The Indian's face was still without expression. "Running Elk has many warriors. Great medicine has been made. My son's spirit thirsts for the blood of Gutman. If your hatred of Gutman is a brother to my hatred, you will leave the train, Jamieson, and be spared. Go now in peace, but if you side with Gutman, you must lie about your hatred. All who side with Gutman, my son's murderer, must die!"

The Indian had spoken. He turned, and the flap of the tent dropped closed behind him. In the silence, the impact of massed Indian eyes on him, Jamieson took his sixgun from the hand of the half-resisting brave who held it. He mounted the bay, and without looking to the left or right, rode out of the camp. He headed down through the twilight of the wilderness back toward the train, and Shep Gutman.



NIGHT was complete but still young when Jamieson rode across the plain to the wagon camp. He could see the flickering of campfires and the shadows of the wagons long before he reached the train. As he drew up before the circle of wagons, a voice challenged him. Jamieson identified himself, saw Moravia standing in the shadows. The smithy had a carbine in his hands. Jamieson passed into the fortress of wagons. In the middle of camp, he saw the greatest of the campfires, and in the light of the leaping flames, he saw a gathering of men. He let his bay walk slowly forward. He could hear the talk of the men now. Young Sandy Calhoun was saying, "He asked me to ramrod this train until he got back—and I'm plagued if I think we should listen to Gutman! A lot I don't like about that Jamieson, but I'll lay money on him coming back."

"Are you goin' to listen to a fuzz-chinned younker?" Gutman's bellowing voice demanded. "How do we know what Jamieson is up to? You men have said yourself that he's never taken you into his confidence, just ordered you around like he was a field marshal. I say he's turned yellow and run out on you. Or gone to cook up some kind of a deal with that Injun. He said he was Running Elk's friend, didn't he? How do you gents know for sure that Jamieson ain't led you this way on purpose—that he ain't in cahoots with the Injun!"

Jamieson sensed the deep impression those words made. Sitting the bay, he felt cold and stiff in his joints. He felt as if he were another person, standing off, looking at himself as he said out of the darkness ringing the campfire, "Gutman, you're a liar and a murderer!"

Gutman spun on his heels, his face mottled as Jamieson dismounted and walked into the glow of the firelight.

"You men are playing the part of fools listening to Gutman!"

"You'll be playing the part of dead men if you don't listen to me! Running Elk won't attack by night. He won't attack on the plain—it would cost him too much blood. He's expecting this train to head into Thunder Pass. There he'll cut it to pieces and take the scalp of every last one of you. But you keep to the plain, head south, take Naked Slash. Cavalry has been moved into Fort Meyer, when the land agent down there reported there were signs of Injun trouble. The cavalry'll see you through Naked Slash safe and sound!"

"You're not saying how long after that they'll be safe and sound, Gutman. Men, out here you need the Indian for a friend. This is new, wild, big country. A lot of you are going off into remote areas to settle. Make the Indian your enemy and some of those remote settlers are going to be wiped out. You'll have real trouble then."

"Words!" Gutman said. "Words! Don't . . ."

"Let him speak, Mister Gutman," old Scoman, hunkered near the fire, said stonily.

"That Injun trouble Gutman's talking about is the murder of a brave or two, among them Running Elk's own son. I don't know that land agent down there, but I intend to see he gets what's coming to him before I'm through. Gutman is holding that land around Naked Slash, men. You settled beyond the Slash, he'll have you at his mercy. You won't be able to take a wagon or animal in or out except through the Slash and it'll be at Gutman's own price! He'll own you. He'll rule a whole empire if he isn't stopped. But I'm stopping him—now! Gutman, I'll give you twenty seconds to get on your mount and clear this camp."

Fireglow chased shadows over Gutman's face. "And if'n I don't?"

"You're armed, now," Jamieson said simply.

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## FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Old Scoman said, "Listen here, we can't have any . . ."

"You'd better 'dive for cover, Mister Scoman. That twenty seconds is moving fast."

Men began a scramble away from the campfire. Jamieson watched Gutman's face, watched its workings, its weighings and balancings. He saw the livid frustration in Gutman's eyes. Gutman had gambled for the control of an empire. He'd gambled too heavily to let one lone man stand in his way, Jamieson thought.

But Gutman was turning away, slipping back from the circle of firelight. Then Jamieson saw the movement of Gutman's hand. The movement was liquid, like a drop of water hanging, waiting to drip from a faucet. Jamieson realized he was moving himself. He heard the tiny individual crackings of the fire; and then he heard the bellowing roar of Gutman's gun.

A man cried out hoarsely. It sounded like young Sandy Calhoun, and Jamieson wondered if Calhoun had been backing him there in the shadows.

Gutman didn't get a chance to fire again. Jamieson felt the gun buck twice in his fist. Both bullets hit Gutman in the face, and both could have been covered by a double eagle.

Gutman pitched back and fell and lay in a dark, still mound on the hot, dusty earth. Jamieson stood with the fire crackling behind him, sliding his gun back in its holster. He sensed the rustling of shadows, and men came easing out into the firelight. Nobody spoke, until old Scoman, kneeling over Sandy Calhoun, said, "A ripped shoulder from that slug of Gutman's, but don't look too bad." Scoman rose to his feet. "Here, somebody, get him started toward a wagon."

Three men picked Calhoun up. Jamieson pushed through the rest of the men who clustered around Gutman's body.



"This," Jamieson said coldly, "is what Running Elk is after." He twined his fingers in Gutman's black, greasy hair. "Because you seemed to Running Elk to be harboring the murderer of his son, he pegged you all as friends of Gutman come to do him dirt. Now get Gutman's horse, and lash him on the saddle."

Old Scoman said, "Where are you figgerin' to take him, Mister Jamieson?"

"To Running Elk. Maybe with the things I can say to him, it'll convince the Indian that Gutman was a mutual enemy."

"It seems kind of hard, Mister Jamieson."

"This is hard country. I figure that a dead crook's scalp is worth far less than scores of the living. And I might add that I am still ram-rodding this train."

A man led Gutman's horse up. Four other men draped the body over the saddle. In the silence there was a chill

and something of awe and a grudging deep respect in the eyes that looked at Jamieson.

He mounted his bay, and took the reins of Gutman's horse. He saw Evie Blane come running up out of the darkness. She saw him, but her gaze passed on over his face. She said breathlessly to Scoman, "Somebody said that Sandy . . . Where is he?"

"They've taken him to the nearest wagon, child."

She turned and ran. To Sandy. To a man who would cut a hearthstone for her. Jamieson watched her go without speaking. One part of him was sad, but another part bubbled with a sense of freedom, and the vastness of the plains, and the excitement of the new towns, and the exhilaration of masses of people in movement all seemed to surge without leash in him as he set out with the dead man toward the shadows of the mountains.

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## FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 62)

Fenwick said, and removed his hat. "I know you've given it to Willie Chu."

Hyme Fenwick rode into Sasco Springs, weary in the saddle, and made his first stop at Hanneford's. He had a drink or two and then told the half dozen men in the place about Ferd Crain's luck, both good and bad, and how he'd met up with Roy Sunbaugh. The deputy laughed at the incredulous expression on the bar-keep's face. "I said Roy Sunbaugh and I meant it," he said, and then took the sack of gold from inside his shirt and dropped it onto the bar. "Maybe a little more'n Ferd owed but I guess Willie is due some interest. I'm takin' it to him now."

He went up to Willie Chu's with half the people of the town straggling behind him. He put the sack of gold on the Chinaman's old pine counter and said, "Ferd Crain ketchum money, Willie. This is what he owed you. Whenever you're ready to go back to your ancestors—"

The Chinaman picked up his gold and looked both happy and sad. "I slaid Flerd would pay me when he ketchum placer glood. That Tluck Smith, he velly blad man, Shellif."

Hyme Fenwick went out trying to comprehend the pattern and the vagaries of life and wondering how you could cull the good in men from the bad, and vice versa. It occurred to him as he headed toward Matt Ide's house that his judgment regarding two of them had been vindicated. He wanted to think that Roy Sunbaugh, by insuring everlasting peace for an old Chinaman's soul, had gone a long way in saving his.

It wouldn't matter to Hyme Fenwick what Matt Ide would say or think about Roy Sunbaugh. Old-time sheriffs like Matt always let their six-guns do most of their thinking.

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## ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 7)

Knowing the futility of further argument in the face of this unsuspected revelation, and realizing that the white men would now seek vengeance, Numaga turned to the eldest chief sorrowfully, indicating that the decision was already made—the Piutes would be forced to fight!

In the meantime, the soft spring wind, blowing over Sun Peak and through Nevada's Carson Valley, brought a strange chill in May, 1860; for news had just been received through Washoe that Indians had burned Williams's Station and murdered five white men.

For the time men forgot the lure of wealth so near at hand in the rich Comstock lode. Indignation was rife. Here was an act of violence that called for swift and complete vengeance.

No one thought to inquire whether the incident had been brought on by the whites themselves, although it was later reliably reported that two squaws had been stolen by the men at Williams's Station, and that some Bannock braves had made up the marauding party which attacked the outpost, apparently with the intention of rescuing the women.

Virginia City, Carson, Silver City, and Genoa all felt the impact of this sudden trouble and determined to quickly quell any thought of an uprising. Each town sent its quota of volunteers to march against the Indians.

**T**HE four brave companies were marshalled under Major William Ormsby. They were untrained and time was too short to plan maneuvers. One hundred and five men, led by Ormsby, set off down the Carson River, pausing at Williams's Station to bury the murdered whites and pick up the trail of the Indians who had fled northward toward Pyramid Lake.

In a swift march Ormsby and his men

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## FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

reached the Truckee and pushed toward Pyramid Lake, hoping to catch the war party-off guard. What they did not know was that all the tribes had been assembled in council at Pyramid Lake when the burning of Williams's Station took place, and that the Piutes especially were prepared to meet them.

As Ormsby's men advanced they suddenly saw a thin line of braves riding along a mesa, just out of rifle range. Major Ormsby ordered a charge and almost immediately realized that he had been lured into an ambush. From all sides the Piutes and their comrades rose from their hiding places, closing in on Ormsby's men. Hundreds of yelling demons armed with rifles, arrows and tomahawks, sought to close off every possible avenue of escape.

As the yelling redmen closed in, Ormsby's trained eye saw that his only chance was to rally his men and beat a slow retreat. Making it to a small knoll which could be defended by the untrained band, Ormsby sought to signal his panic-stricken men, but just as he reached the knoll his horse turned and threw him.

Close on his heels was a horde of shouting Piute braves. Trying to rise, Ormsby attempted to plead with them in an effort to save his men. But before he could reach his feet an arrow struck his heart.

Leaderless, the volunteers now sought to escape as best they could, fleeing from the pursuing redmen in wild disorder. The white men's first attempt to avenge an Indian outrage had met with utter failure.

A few days after Major Ormsby's party had set out to chastise the Piutes and their kindred tribes for the killing of five men, panic swept Washoe and the valley settlements.

Survivors of the terrible ambush were beginning to straggle into Buckland's Station, and their tales of the massacre spread like wildfire through Virginia City and other nearby towns.



## ON THE TRAIL

In five days' time a seemingly small event, as such events were judged in the West of that period, had thrown Nevada settlements into a panic. With each retelling of how Ormsby's little band had been trapped along the Truckee, fear was heightened for the safety of all the white men in Nevada, Western Utah and along the California mountain fringes.

Women and children were hastened to the strongest stone buildings in each town, sentinels were stationed at vantage points and urgent requests were swiftly flashed by messenger to California towns asking aid, and warning settlers that the Piutes were on the warpath.

Major Warren Wasson volunteered to run the Indian gauntlet alone from Carson City to Honey Lake Valley, to warn settlers that the Piutes might attack, and to deliver an order commanding a company of cavalry stationed there to proceed at once to Carson City.

Without changing mounts, Major Wasson rode the distance of one hundred ten miles in fourteen hours to deliver his message. Immediately the cavalry from Honey Lake rode south to join the expedition against the Piutes.

Meanwhile, forces were gathering everywhere. The Washoe regiment of eight infantry and six cavalry companies were placed under the command of Colonel Jack Hays, an old Indian fighter. Major Daniel Hungerford and Captain Edward Storey, who headed the Virginia rifles, were placed on the staff.

The Third Artillery from Fort Alcatraz and the Sixth infantry from Benicia Barracks were ordered from the coast to join the volunteers. The well-disciplined, thoroughly organized forces met at the big bend of the Truckee on the last day of May. The expedition was under way and its commanding officers had no doubt as to the outcome.

On June 2 a scouting party found the

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ghastly remains of the Ormsby massacre, and a short distance further north they discovered an advanced band of Indians.

Under Captain Storey they stormed the Indian command post on a promontory where Chief Numaga was giving Piute battle orders. On gaining the vantage point, they found themselves flanked by redmen, but the approaching regulars, deployed as skirmishers, passed under the low butte, driving the Piutes before them.

For three hours the battle lasted with the Indians yielding each rock and tree only after all hope was gone. To conceal their casualties from the whites, the Piutes carried with them the bodies of their dead and wounded, concealing them in rock piles. Hard pressed by the mile-long line of white regulars and volunteers, the Piutes fled the field at sundown. The battle of the Truckee was over.

*(Continued from page 36)*

"He'll have to hear her at home," said Dr. Edwards. He's really lucky to be alive."

Edith bit her lips. She nodded. She tried to blink the tears from her eyes.

"When he wakes up," said the doctor, "tell him that a few of us finished closing the Casa Grande. After all, I had to do that or I couldn't have kept Blake in bed. You can ask him, too, what we're going to do for a sheriff while both he and Blake are resting up. By the way, did you know he was going to tackle that Casa Grande crowd alone? Did he tell you?"

"He didn't tell me," said Edith, "but I knew."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"He was doing what he felt he had to do, doctor," said Edith proudly.

The doctor cleared his throat. He nodded his head. "Take care of him," he said gruffly. "This country needs men with the courage to do their jobs. It always will."



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